The Conformist

BY

ALBERTO MORAVIA

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THE CONFORMIST tells an intense story, building from climax to climax. It keeps the reader absorbed in continuous physical and psychological action as it unravels the twists and turns of a man snared in his own destiny.

It is the story of the life, loves and fate of Marcello Clerici, a high Fascist official called upon to act as a spy. His iron and bitter desire is to become not a rebel set apart from others, but a conformist in step with the crowd. So strong is his resolve and so sinister his motives that he will embrace any evil in his struggle for conformity.

His fiancé says to him, looking at him with a kind of strange curiosity, "Most people want to be different from everyone else . . . but you're just the opposite; anyone would think you wanted to be *like* everyone else."

All over the world and in your own community are men who falsely con-

(Continued on back flap)

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(Continued from front flap)

form, and they are men you will recognize. Moravia has drawn a brilliant and uncompromising portrait of a type he deplores and fears.

By far the finest and most important novel Moravia has written, it shows with great skill and without pity the irrational tides that sweep a man through life to shipwreck or to landfall. The character drawing is intricate and persuasive, and the book is remarkable for its many scenes, all precisely selected, that reveal motive through action. Above all, this is a story, fast and absorbing; but whether it is read as a story, as a study of the influence of sex on political behavior or as a commentary on normal life in a totalitarian regime, it is dramatic and unforgettable.

Every novel Alberto Moravia has written has been building up to THE CONFORMIST. More dramatic and earthy than THE WOMAN OF ROME, more poignant than TWO ADOLESCENTS, and more personal than CONJUGAL LOVE, it is his greatest book, and one of the finest novels to come out of Europe in our time.

Translated from the Italian by Angus Davidson

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PROLOGUE

CHAPTER ONE

MARCELLO, as a child, was fascinated, magpie-like, by objects. It may have been because his parents, from indifference rather than austerity, had never thought to satisfy his instinct for property; it may have been because other instincts, more profound and still vague, were, in him, masked by avidity: but he was continually assailed by furious longings for the most diverse articles. A pencil with a rubber tip, a picture book, a slingshot, a ruler, a portable ebonite inkpot—any sort of trifle served to rouse his mind to an intense and unreasoning desire for the thing he yearned for, and once it had come into his possession, to an astonished, enchanted, insatiable complacency. At home, Marcello had a room to himself where he slept and did his lessons. Here, all the objects spread about on the table or shut up in drawers had, for him, the quality of things sacred, or just slightly desecrated, according to whether they were recent or old acquisitions. They were not, in fact, objects like other objects in the house, but fragments, rather, of something already experienced or about to be experienced, something that was fraught with passion and uncertainty. He was aware, in his own way, of this singular characteristic that property possesses,

and while he derived an ineffable delight from it, at the same time he suffered because of it, as he might have suffered over some fault that was continually repeated and therefore allowed no time for remorse.

Of all objects, however, those that attracted him most strongly, perhaps because they were forbidden, were weapons. Not the sham weapons that little boys play with—tin rifles, revolvers that go off with a pop, daggers made of wood —but real weapons, in which the idea of menace, of danger, of death is not confined to a mere resemblance of shape but is the first and last reason of their existence. With a child's revolver you could play at death without any possibility of actually bringing it about; but with grown-ups' revolvers death was not only possible but imperative, a temptation curbed only by prudence. Marcello had, on occasion, held these real weapons in his hands—a shotgun in the country, his father's old revolver which he had shown him one day in a drawer—and each time he had felt a thrill at the contact, as though in grasping the weapon his hand had at last found its own natural extension.

Marcello had numerous friends among the small boys of the neighborhood, and he very soon realized that his taste for weapons had deeper and obscurer origins than their innocent military infatuations. They would play at soldiers with a pretence of ruthlessness and ferocity, but really their interest in the game was love of the game itself and they aped the postures of cruelty, actor-like, without any real participation of feeling. In him just the opposite occurred, it was his ruthlessness and ferocity that sought an outlet in playing at soldiers, or, when there was no game of that kind, in other pastimes falling in with his taste for destruction and death.

Marcello at that time was remorselessly, shamelessly cruel, in a manner that was perfectly natural, for it was from cruelty

that he derived the only pleasures that did not seem to him insipid, and this cruelty was still childish enough to arouse no suspicions either in himself or in others. For instance, he would go out into the garden at the hottest time of day, in this time of early summer. It was a small but overgrown garden where a great number of plants and trees, abandoned for years to their own natural exuberance, grew in complete disorder. Marcello would go to the garden armed with a thin, flexible cane that he had torn from an old, broken clothes-beater he had found in the attic, and he would wander around the gravel paths, now in the cheerful shade of the trees, now in the hot sunshine, examining the plants. He felt his eyes shining, his whole body becoming receptive to a sensation of well-being that seemed to mingle with the general vitality of the exuberant, light-filled garden; he felt happy. But it was an aggressive, cruel happiness, a happiness that was, as it were, desirous of measuring itself by comparison with the unhappiness of others. When he saw, in the middle of a flower bed, a fine clump of marguerites covered with white and yellow flowers, or a tulip with its red cup erect on a green stalk, or a cluster of arums with tall, white fleshy flowers, Marcello would strike a single blow with his cane, making it whistle through the air like a sword. The cane would cut off the flowers and leaves neatly and cleanly and they would fall to the ground beside the plant, leaving the decapitated stalks standing erect. He was conscious, as he did this, of a feeling of redoubled vitality and of the delicious sort of satisfaction that results from an outlet of energy too long suppressed. He felt an indefinable sense of power and of justice. It was as though the plants had been guilty and he had punished them and had at the same time felt that it was in his power to punish them. But he was not entirely ignorant of the forbidden, reprehensible character of this pastime. Every now and then, almost in spite of himself,

he would cast furtive glances at the villa, fearful that his mother might be watching him from the drawing-room window, or the cook from the kitchen. And in a confused way he was aware that it was not only the scolding he dreaded, but the mere witnessing of acts which he himself realized to be abnormal and mysteriously inbued with guilt.

The transition from flowers and plants to living creatures was imperceptible, as it is in nature. Marcello could not have said when it was that he discovered that the same pleasure he derived from smashing plants and cutting the heads off flowers could be found, even more intensely and profoundly, by inflicting the same kind of violence on living creatures. It may have been mere chance that encouraged him along this road—a stroke of his cane which, instead of maiming a shrub, smote the back of a lizard lying asleep on a branch; or it may have been incipient boredom and satiety that put into his head the idea of searching for new material on which to exercise his still unconscious cruelty. However that may be, one quiet afternoon when everyone in the house was asleep, Marcello found himself, as though smitten by a lightning flash of remorse and shame, face to face with a slaughtered mass of lizards. There were five or six of them he had managed to hunt out, by various methods, on the branches of trees or the stones of the garden wall, striking them down with a single blow of his cane just at the moment when, becoming suspicious of his motionless presence, they sought to flee for shelter. How he had reached this point he could not have said, or rather he preferred not to remind himself of it; but now it was all over, and nothing remained but the burning sunlight striking impurely upon the bleeding, dust-soiled bodies of the dead lizards. He was standing in front of the cement footpath where the lizards lay, his cane grasped firmly in his fist; and he still felt, all through his body and in his face, the excitement that

had filled him during the slaughter—no longer pleasantly glowing, as it had been then, but already becoming tainted with remorse and shame. He was aware, too, that on this occasion there was not only the usual feeling of cruelty and power but an additional, special agitation that was new to him and inexplicably physical; and, as well as shame and remorse, he had a vague feeling of alarm.

He felt as though he had discovered within himself a characteristic that was completely abnormal, a characteristic that he ought to be ashamed of, that he must keep secret so as not to be ashamed of it in front of others as well as in himself, because it might result in cutting him off forever from the society of those his own age. There was no doubt of it, he was different from the boys of his own age, who for their part did not spend their time, either together or by themselves, in pursuits of this kind; and not only different, but different in a most uncompromising manner. For the lizards were dead, of that there could be no doubt; and their death, and the cruel, crazy acts he had performed in order to bring it about, were irreparable. He *was,* in fact, those acts, just as in the past he had been other, entirely innocent and normal acts.

To prove the truth of this new and painful discovery of his own abnormality, Marcello was anxious to compare notes with a little friend of his, Roberto, who lived in the house next door. In the late afternoon Roberto, having finished his lessons, used to come down into the garden, and from then until supper time, by mutual agreement of their families, the two boys used to play together, sometimes in one garden, sometimes in the other. Through all the long, silent afternoon, alone in his room, lying on the bed, Marcello waited impatiently for this moment. His parents had gone out and there was no one in the house except the cook, whom he could hear from time to time humming gently to herself in

the kitchen on the ground floor. Usually in the afternoon he worked or played by himself in his own room; but on this day neither work nor play attracted him; he felt incapable of doing anything and at the same time furiously impatient of doing nothing; and he was paralyzed and irritated both by his alarm at the discovery he thought he had made and by his hope that that alarm would be dissipated by his coming meeting with Roberto. If Roberto told him that he, too, often killed lizards and that he liked killing them and saw no harm in killing them, then, it seemed to him, all feeling of abnormality would vanish and he would be able to regard his slaughter of the lizards with indifference, as an incident without significance and without consequences. He could not have said why he attributed so much authority to Roberto; vaguely he thought that if Roberto also did things like that and in the same sort of way and with the same feelings, that meant that everybody did them, and what everybody did was normal or right. These reflections were not very clear in Marcello's mind and they presented themselves more in the guise of feelings and profound impulses than as precise thoughts. But of one fact he felt he was sure: his tranquillity of mind depended on Roberto's answer.

In this state of hope and alarm he waited impatiently for the afternoon to end. He was almost falling asleep when a long, modulated whistle from the garden reached his ears: it was the agreed signal by which Roberto gave notice of his presence. Marcello rose from his bed and without turning on the light went out of the room, down the stairs and out into the garden, in the semidarkness of sunset.

The trees stood motionless and frowning in the dim summer twilight; beneath their branches the shadow was already the darkness of night. The breath of flowers, the smell of dust, waves of heat rising from the sun-soaked earth hung in the

still, heavy air. The railings that divided Marcello's garden from Roberto's were completely invisible beneath an enormous blanket of ivy, thick and deep, like a superimposed wall of leaves. Marcello went straight to a corner at the far end of the garden where the ivy and the shadows were thickest, jumped up onto a big stone, and with a single, deliberate movement thrust aside a mass of the creeper. It was he who had invented this little peephole in the foliage of the ivy, and it gave him the feeling of a secret, adventurous game. When he had pushed the ivy aside, he could see the bars of the railings, and between the bars, the delicate, pale face, crowned with fair hair, of his friend Roberto. Marcello stood on tiptoe on the stone and asked, "Nobody's seen us, have they?"

It was the opening formula of this game of theirs. Roberto answered, as though reciting a lesson, "No, nobody. . . ." And then, after a moment, "Have you been working?"

He spoke in a whisper—also part of the agreed procedure. Marcello, also whispering, replied, "No, I haven't done any work this afternoon . . . I didn't feel like it . . . I shall tell my governess I felt ill."

"I wrote out my Italian exercise," Roberto murmured, "and I did one of the arithmetic problems, too . . . I've still got another one to do. Why didn't you do any work?"

This was the question Marcello had been waiting for. "I didn't do any work," he answered, "because I was hunting lizards."

He was hoping that Roberto would say, "Oh really . . . I hunt lizards too sometimes," or something of that kind. But Roberto's face displayed neither complicity nor even curiosity. So he added, with an effort, trying to conceal his own embarrassment, "I killed them all."

Roberto prudently asked, "How many?"

"Seven altogether," replied Marcello. And then, with a

forced swagger of a technical, informative kind, he went on: "They were on the branches of the trees and on the stones . . . I waited till they moved and then got them on the wing —with a single stroke of this cane—one stroke each." He made a grimace of satisfaction and showed the cane to Roberto.

He saw the other boy look at it with a curiosity not unmixed with a kind of wonder. "Why did you kill them?" he asked.

"Well. . . ." He hesitated, and was on the point of saying, "Because I enjoyed it." Then, without knowing why, he forebore, and answered, "Because they do harm . . . Didn't you know that lizards do harm?"

"No," said Roberto, "I didn't know . . . do harm to what?"

"They eat the grapes," said Marcello. "Last year, in the country, they ate up all the grapes on the pergola."

"But there aren't grapes here."

"Besides," he went on, without bothering to take up the objection, "they're vicious. One of them, when it saw me, instead of escaping, came at me with its mouth wide open . . . If I hadn't stopped it in time, it would have jumped right on to me. . . ." He was silent for a moment, and then, in a more confidential way, added, "Haven't you ever killed any?"

Roberto shook his head and answered: "No, never." Then, lowering his eyes, with a grieved look on his face: "I've been told not to hurt animals."

"Who told you?"

"Mummy did."

"People tell you all sorts of things. . . ." said Marcello, getting less and less sure of himself, "but you try, silly . . . I tell you it's fun."

"No, I shan't try."

"Why?"

"Because it's bad."

So there was nothing to be done, thought Marcello, disappointed. A surge of anger rose in him against the friend who, without knowing it, was nailing him down to his own abnormality. He managed to control himself and suggested, "Look, I'm going to have another lizard hunt tomorrow . . . If you come and hunt with me, I'll make you a present of that pack of cards for the 'Merchant at the Fair.' "

He knew that this was a tempting offer to Roberto, who had several times expressed his desire to possess that pack of cards. And indeed Roberto, as if illuminated by a sudden inspiration, replied, "I'll come and hunt with you on one condition: that we catch them alive and put them in a box and then let them go again . . . and you must give me the pack of cards."

"No, no, that won't do," said Marcello, "the best part of the game is knocking them out with this cane . . . I bet *you* couldn't do it."

The other boy said nothing. Marcello went on, "All right, come on, then . . . that's agreed . . . but you must try and find a cane for yourself."

"No," said Roberto obstinately, "I shan't come."

"But why? It's quite new, that pack of cards."

"No, it's no use," said Roberto, "I'm not going to go killing lizards . . . not even if—" he hesitated, trying to think of some object of proportionate value—"not even if you give me your pistol."

Marcello saw there was nothing to be done, and suddenly gave way to the anger which had for some moments been boiling in his breast. "You don't want to because you're a coward," he said, "because you're afraid."

"Afraid? Afraid of what? You make me laugh."

"You're afraid," repeated Marcello angrily, "you're a rab-

bit . . . just a rabbit." Suddenly he thrust his hand through the railing and seized his friend by the ear. Roberto's ears were prominent and red, and it was not the first time that Marcello had seized hold of them; but never had he done so with such violence and with so clear a desire to hurt. "Confess you're a rabbit."

"No, let me go," the other boy began to cry out, twisting himself about, "Ooh . . . ow."

"Confess you're a rabbit."

"No . . . let me go."

"Confess you're a rabbit."

In his hand Roberto's ear was burning hot and sweaty; tears appeared in the blue eyes of the victim. He stammered out: "Yes, all right, I'm a rabbit"; and Marcello immediately let him go. Roberto jumped down from the railing and ran away, shouting, "I'm not a rabbit. . . . While I was saying it I was thinking: I'm *not* a rabbit . . . I fooled you all right." He disappeared, and his voice, tearful and derisive, was lost in the distance, beyond the shrubbery of the adjoining garden.

This conversation left Marcello with a feeling of deep discomfort. Roberto had not only refused him his support but had also denied him the absolution he was seeking and which seemed to him to be bound up with that support. Thus he was thrust back into his abnormality; but not without having first shown Roberto how important it was to him to escape from it, or without having given way—as he perfectly well realized—to both falsehood and violence. And now, to his shame and remorse at having killed the lizards was added the shame and remorse of having lied to Roberto about the reasons that had prompted him to invite his co-operation, and at having betrayed himself by that angry movement, when he had seized hold of him by the ear. To his first feeling of guilt

was added a second, and he was unable to rid himself of either.

Now and then, as he reflected bitterly over these things, his memory went back to the slaughter of the lizards, in the hope, almost, that he might find it to be purged of all remorse, to be a simple fact like any other. But he realized at once that what he wanted was that the lizards should not be dead; and at the same time he was conscious again of that physical excitement and agitation he had felt while chasing them—a feeling that now came over him violently and perhaps not altogether unpleasantly, but, for that very reason, with all the more repugnance. It was so strong that he even went so far as to doubt whether, during the following days, he could resist the temptation to repeat the slaughter. This thought terrified him; not merely was he abnormal but, far from being able to suppress his abnormality, he could not even control it. He was at this moment in his own room, sitting at the table with a book open in front of him, waiting for supper. He jumped up impetuously, went over to the bed and, throwing himself on his knees on the mat, as he did when saying his prayers, clasped his hands together and said aloud, in a tone of voice that seemed to him sincere, "I swear before God that never again will I touch either flowers or plants or lizards."

Nevertheless the need for absolution that had driven him to seek the support of Roberto still persisted, transformed now into its opposite, into a need for condemnation. Roberto, who could have saved him from remorse by rallying to his side, had not sufficient authority to consolidate the foundations of that remorse and, by a verdict against which there was no appeal, bring order into the confusion that reigned in his mind. He was a boy just like himself, acceptable as an

accomplice but inadequate as a judge. But Roberto, in refusing his proposal, had invoked maternal authority in support of his own disgust. It occurred to Marcello to appeal to his mother. She alone could condemn or absolve him and, somehow or other, bring his deed into line with some sort of order. Marcello, who knew his mother, was reasoning from the abstract in taking this decision, which was made in reference to an ideal mother, such as she ought to have been and not such as she was. Actually, he was doubtful of the success of his appeal. But there it was; she was the only mother he had, and besides, his impulse to turn to her was stronger than any doubt.

Marcello waited for the moment when his mother came up to his room to say good night to him, after he had gone to bed. This was one of the few moments when he was able to see her alone: almost always, at meals or during his occasional walks with his parents, his father was present the whole time. Marcello, although he had not, by instinct, much confidence in his mother, loved her and felt for her—even more than love—an admiration of a perplexed and affectionate kind, an admiration such as one might feel for an elder sister of singular habits and capricious character. Marcello's mother, who had married extremely young, had remained morally and physically a mere girl. Furthermore, although she was not on intimate terms with her son, of whom she took very little notice owing to her many social engagements, she had never made any sharp division between her own life and his. Marcello therefore had grown up in a continual tumult of rushings in and out of the house, of clothes being tried on and cast aside, of telephone conversations as interminable as they were frivolous, of tiffs with dressmakers and shopkeepers, of quarrels with the maid, of ceaseless variations of humor for the most futile reasons. He

was allowed to go into his mother's room at any time, an inquisitive and ignored spectator of an intimacy in which he had no place. Sometimes his mother, as though shaken out of her inertia by sudden remorse, decided to devote herself to her son and carried him off with her to a dressmaker or a hatshop. On these occasions, compelled to spend long hours sitting on a stool while his mother tried on hats and dresses, Marcello almost regretted her usual tempestuous indifference.

That evening, as he saw at once, his mother was in even more of a hurry than usual; in fact, even before Marcello had time to overcome his own shyness, she turned her back upon him and was crossing the darkened room toward the half-open door. But Marcello did not mean to wait another day for the verdict of which he stood in need. Sitting up in bed, he called out loudly, "Mummy!"

She turned back from the doorway, with a gesture of annoyance. "What is it, Marcello?" she asked, and came over to the bed again.

She was standing close to him now, against the light, white and slim in her black low-necked dress. Her delicate, pale face, in its frame of black hair, was in shadow—not so much so, however, as to conceal from Marcello its discontented, fidgety, impatient expression. Carried along by his impulse to speak, he announced, "Mummy, there's something I want to tell you."

"All right, Marcello, but be quick about it . . . Mummy's got to go out, and Daddy's waiting." Meanwhile, her two hands were fumbling at the back of her neck with the clasp of her necklace.

Marcello wanted to tell his mother all about the slaughter of the lizards and ask her if he had done wrong. But his mother's haste caused him to change his mind. Or rather, it caused him to alter the sentence that he had prepared in his mind. It seemed to him all at once that lizards were

creatures altogether too small and insignificant to arrest the attention of anyone so preoccupied. There and then, without himself knowing why, he invented a lie to increase the importance of his own crime. He hoped, by the enormity of his guilt, to succeed in stirring his mother's feelings, which he divined, in an obscure manner, to be obtuse and inert. He said, with a sureness that astonished him, "Mummy, I killed the cat."

Just at that moment his mother had at last managed to bring together the two clips of the clasp. With her hands joined at the back of her neck and her chin pressed firmly against her chest, she stared downward and out of impatience beat her heel against the floor. "Oh yes," she said in an uncomprehending voice, as though deprived of all power of attention by the effort she was making. Marcello clinched the matter by saying, in an uncertain tone, "I killed it with my slingshot."

He saw his mother shake her head in annoyance and then remove her hands from her neck, holding in one of them the necklace she had failed to fasten. "This wretched clasp," she burst forth angrily. "Marcello . . . be a good boy and help me with my necklace." She sat down on the bed, slantwise, her back toward the boy, and added impatiently, "But mind you make sure that the clasp catches properly . . . otherwise it'll come undone again."

As she spoke she presented her thin back to him, bare to the waist and white as paper in the light that came in through the door. Her slim hands, with their pointed, scarlet nails, held the necklace loosely at the back of her delicate neck, where the curly hair shadowed it. Marcello told himself that once the necklace was fastened she would listen to him with more patience; leaning forward, he took the two ends and clicked them firmly together in one movement. But his

mother immediately rose to her feet, and bending down and kissing him lightly, said, "Thank you. Now go to sleep . . . good night." And, before Marcello could make a motion or a sound to stop her, she had vanished.

It was hot next day, and the sky was overcast. Marcello, having eaten his food in silence between his two silent parents, slipped stealthily from his seat and went out through the French window into the garden. As usual, digestion brought with it a feeling of torpid discomfort mingled with a heightened and pensive sensuality. Walking slowly, almost on tiptoe, on the crunching gravel, in the insect-humming shade of the trees, he went as far as the gate and looked out. There was the well-known street, sloping slightly, bordered on each side by pepper trees of a feathery, almost milky green. The street was deserted at this hour of the day, and strangely dark by reason of the low black clouds that overspread the sky. Opposite he could see glimpses of other gates, other gardens, other homes similar to his own. After having carefully surveyed the street, Marcello left the gate, took his slingshot from his pocket and stepped down to the ground. There were a number of large, white pebbles among the fine gravel. Marcello picked up one of these the size of a nut, inserted it in the leather pouch of his slingshot and started walking along the wall that separated his own garden from Roberto's.

His idea, or rather his feeling, was that he was in a state of war with Roberto and must keep the strictest possible watch over the ivy that covered the dividing wall and, at the slightest movement, open fire—discharge the stone that he was holding tightly in his slingshot. It was a game in which he expressed his bitterness against Roberto for not having been willing to be an accomplice in the lizard slaughter, and the brutal, cruel instinct that had spurred him on to effect the slaughter itself. Marcello knew perfectly well that Roberto,

accustomed to sleeping at that time of day, would not be peeping at him from behind the leaves of the ivy; and yet, although he knew it, he acted in a serious and consequential manner, as though he was certain that Roberto really was there. The ivy, ancient and gigantic, reached right up to the very spike-tips of the railings, and its leaves, overlapping each other, big, black and dusty, like folds of lace on the calm bosom of a woman, hung still and limp in the heavy, windless air. Once or twice it seemed to him that a very faint rustle set the foliage quivering—or rather, he pretended to himself that he had seen this quivering and at once, with intense satisfaction, he discharged the stone into the mass of ivy.

The moment he had fired his shot he bent down hastily and picked up another pebble, then resumed his fighting attitude, legs wide apart, arms braced in front of him, sling-shot ready to shoot. There was no knowing, Roberto might be behind the foliage, in the act of taking aim at him and with the advantage of being concealed, whereas he was completely exposed. And so, occupied with this game, he came to the bottom of the garden and to the place where he had cut out the peephole in the ivy. Here he stopped, looking carefully at the garden wall. In his imagination the house was a castle, the creeper-hidden railings its fortified walls, and the little opening a dangerous, easily passed breach. And then, suddenly, and this time without any possibility of doubt, he saw the leaves move from right to left, trembling and shaking. Yes, he was sure of it, the leaves were moving, and there must be somebody there to make them move. All in a single moment it occurred to him that it was not Roberto but was only a game, and that, seeing it was a game, he could shoot off his pebble; and at the same time that it *was* Roberto, and that he must not shoot if he did not want to kill him. Then, with sudden, unthinking determination, he stretched the elastic and dis-

charged the stone into the thick of the foliage. Not content with this, he stooped down, inserted another stone in the slingshot with feverish haste, fired it off, seized a third one and fired that off too. By now he had put aside all scruples and fears, and it no longer mattered to him whether Roberto was there or not; his only feeling was one of hilarious, pugnacious excitement. At last, out of breath, having thoroughly riddled the ivy foliage, he dropped the slingshot and scrambled up on to the garden wall. As he had expected and hoped, Roberto was not there. But the bars of the railings were very wide apart, making it possible for him to thrust his head through into the next-door garden. Spurred on by a curiosity he did not understand, he bent forward and looked down.

On Roberto's side of the railings there was no creeper, but a flower bed full of irises running along between the wall and the graveled path. And then, right under his eyes, between the wall and the row of white and purple irises, Marcello saw a large gray cat lying on its side. A crazy terror made him hold his breath when he noticed the unnatural position in which the animal was lying—stretched flat on its side, with its paws extended and relaxed and its muzzle buried in the soil. Its fur, thick and of a bluish-gray color, looked slightly shaggy and ruffled and at the same time lifeless, like the feathers of dead birds he had sometimes seen on the marble slab in the kitchen. Now his terror increased. He jumped down to the ground, pulled up a stake from the rose bed, clambered up again, and thrusting his arm through the railings, contrived to prod the cat's flank with the earthy point of the stake. But the cat did not move. All at once the irises, with their long green stalks and their white and purple petals curling down round the motionless gray body, seemed to be the badge of death, like flowers arranged by some pious hand round a corpse. He threw away the stake and, without

troubling to put back the ivy in its place, jumped to the ground.

He felt himself a prey to all sorts of terrors and his first impulse was to run and shut himself up in a cupboard, or a hidden recess, or anywhere, in fact, where there was darkness and secrecy, so that he could escape from himself. He was terrified, in the first place, because he had killed the cat, and also, perhaps to an even greater degree, because he had announced this killing to his mother the previous evening—an unmistakable sign that he was predestined in some mysterious and fatal way to accomplish acts of cruelty and death. But the terror aroused in him by the cat's death and his own significant premonition of it was far surpassed by the terror inspired in him by the idea that, in killing the cat, he had really intended to kill Roberto. It was by chance alone that the cat was dead in place of his friend. It was a chance, however, that was not devoid of meaning; for it could not be denied that there had been a consistent progression from the flowers to the lizards, from the lizards to the cat, and from the cat to the murder of Roberto which he had meditated and desired but not accomplished, but which could nevertheless be accomplished and was, perhaps, inevitable. And so he was an abnormal being, he could not help thinking—or rather feeling, with a lively, physical consciousness of this abnormality—an abnormal being marked out by a solitary, menacing fate and already launched upon a bloody course in which no human force could arrest him.

These thoughts whirled frantically round in his head as he crossed the brief space between the house and the gate, raising his eyes every now and then to the windows, hoping to catch sight there of the figure of his thoughtless, frivolous mother. Now, however, she could no longer do anything for him, even if she had ever been capable of doing anything.

Then, with a sudden flash of hope, he ran down again to the bottom of the garden, climbed up on to the wall and looked through the railings. He almost deceived himself into thinking that he would find the place empty where he had previously seen the dead cat. The cat, however, had not gone away; it was still there, gray and motionless in the midst of its funeral wreath of white and purple irises. And the fact of death was affirmed, with the added, gruesome feeling of a corpse in decay, by a black line of ants starting from the path and crossing the flower bed till it reached the muzzle, or rather the eyes, of the animal.

He watched and, all of a sudden, like a superimposed vision, it seemed to him that instead of the cat he saw Roberto, that it was he who lay among the irises, that it was he who was dead, that it was from his sightless eyes and his half-open mouth that the ants were coming and going. With a shudder of horror he tore himself away from this ghastly contemplation and jumped down. But this time he took care to pull back the mass of ivy over the peephole. For now, in addition to his remorse and his terror of himself, he began to feel a fear that he might be discovered and punished.

Nevertheless, even while he feared it, he felt that he wanted this discovery and this punishment, if only in order to be stopped in time on the slippery descent at the bottom of which murder seemed to be inevitably awaiting him. Marcello's parents, however, had never punished him, as far as he could remember, not so much because of any educational principle excluding punishing as—and this he vaguely understood—from sheer indifference. And so, to the misery of suspecting himself of having committed a crime and, moreover, of being capable of committing other, more serious crimes, there was added the further misery of not knowing to whom to turn to get himself punished, and of being ignorant

even of what the punishment might be. Marcello realized dimly that the same mechanism that had prompted him to confide his guilt to Roberto in the hope of hearing that it was not a question of guilt but of an ordinary thing that everybody did, was now suggesting to him that he should make the same revelation to his parents in the contrary hope of seeing them exclaim indignantly that he had committed a horrible crime that he must expiate with a suitable penalty. Little did it matter to him that, on the one hand, Roberto's absolution would have encouraged him to act in the precise manner which, on the other, would draw down upon him a severe condemnation. In reality—as he understood—what he wanted in both cases was to escape, at all costs and by any means, from the terrifying isolation of abnormality.

Perhaps he might have made up his mind to confess to his parents that he had killed the cat if he had not had the feeling, that same evening at supper, that they already knew everything. In fact, the moment he sat down at the table he noticed, with a mingled sense of alarm and insecure relief, that his father and mother looked hostile and ill-humored. His mother, with a self-conscious, exaggerated expression of dignity on her childish face, sat upright, with downcast eyes, in an obviously scornful silence. Opposite her, his father displayed similar feelings of ill-humor, by signs which, though different, were no less expressive. Marcello's father, many years older than his wife, often gave his son the disconcerting sensation that he coupled him and his mother together on the same childish, inferior level, as though she were not his mother but his sister. His father was thin, with a lean, furrowed face illumined but rarely by brief bursts of joyless laughter, a face in which there were two noteworthy features that undoubtedly had some intimate connection—an expressionless, almost metallic glint in the protruding eyeballs and

a constant twitching of some frenetic nerve beneath the tight-drawn skin of the cheek. Perhaps by reason of the many years he had spent in the army, he had retained a taste for precise gestures, for carefully controlled attitudes. But Marcello knew that, when his father was angry, precision and control became excessive and were transformed into their very opposite, that is, into a curious sort of contained, methodical violence, aimed at charging the simplest movements with significance.

That evening, at table, Marcello noticed at once that his father was sharply emphasizing actions that were habitual and of no importance, as though to call attention to them. For instance, he took up his glass, drank a mouthful and then put it back on the table with a bang; he put out his hand for the saltcellar, helped himself to a pinch of salt and as he put it down there was another bang; he seized the bread, cut off a piece, and again banged it down on the table. Then, as though seized with a sudden craze for symmetry, he tried with the same brusque movements to place his soup plate so that it was exactly framed by the cutlery, the knife, fork and spoon meeting around it at right angles. If Marcello had been less preoccupied with his own guilty feelings, he would easily have realized that these movements, so charged with pregnant, gloomy energy, were directed not at himself but at his mother—who at each loud noise, wrapped herself up, so to speak, in her dignity, with self-satisfied sighs and long-suffering raisings of the eyebrows. But blinded by his own anxiety, he did not doubt that his parents knew everything. Roberto of course, rabbit that he was, had been playing the sneak. Marcello had wanted punishment, but now, seeing his parents so angry, he was possessed by a sudden horror of the violence of which he knew his father to be capable in such circumstances. Just as his mother's manifestations of affection

were sporadic, casual, obviously dictated more by remorse than by maternal love, so his father's severities were unexpected, unjustified, excessive; inspired more by a wish to make up for lost time after long periods of inattention than by any educational intention. Without warning, after some complaint from Marcello's mother or the cook, he would remember that he had a son, would start shouting at him, getting into a rage with him and striking him. It was the blows that frightened Marcello more than anything, because his father wore on his little finger a ring with a massive setting which, during these scenes, always happened by some means or other to get turned round towards the palm of his hand, thus adding a more penetrating pain to the humiliating severity of the blow. Marcello suspected that his father turned the ring round on purpose, but he was not sure.

Nervous, frightened, he started with feverish haste to invent a plausible lie: *he* had not killed the cat, it had been Roberto, and the cat was, in fact, in Roberto's garden, and how could he possibly have killed it through the ivy and the garden wall? But he suddenly remembered that he had announced the killing of the cat to his mother the evening before, and it had then happened, in actual fact, the next day; and he saw that no sort of lie would be of any use to him. However vague she might be, his mother had certainly passed on his confession to his father, and the latter, no less certainly, had established the connection between his confession and Roberto's accusations; and so there was no possibility of contradiction. At this thought, passing from one extreme to the other, he had a renewed impulse of longing for punishment, provided it came quickly and was decisive. What kind of punishment? He remembered that Roberto had once spoken of boarding schools as places where parents sent undisciplined boys as a punishment, and he was surprised to

find himself violently desiring this sort of penance. It was his unconscious weariness of a family life disorderly and lacking in affection that expressed itself in this desire, causing him not merely to long for something that his parents would consider a punishment, but also inducing him to cheat himself and his own need of that punishment by means of the rather cunning calculations that he would by this method not only allay his remorse but at the same time better his condition. This thought at once brought to his mind pictures that ought to have been disheartening but instead were pleasing to him—an austere, cold-looking, gray building with big barred windows; chilly, bare rooms with rows of beds beneath lofty, white walls; dreary halls filled with benches, with the master's desk at the far end; empty corridors, dark staircases, massive doors, impassable railings—everything, in fact, as in a prison and yet all of it preferable to the capricious, tormenting, unendurable freedom of his own home. Even the idea of wearing a uniform of striped cloth and having his head shaved, like the boys he had sometimes encountered in "crocodiles" in the streets—even this humilating, almost repulsive idea became pleasing to him in his present desperate hankering after any kind of order and normality.

As these fantastic thoughts passed through his head he was no longer looking at his father but at the dazzling whiteness of the tablecloth, on which, from time to time, some night insect would drop down that had flown in through the open window to dash itself against the lamp shade. Then he raised his eyes and was just in time to see, right behind his father, on the window sill, the outline of a cat. But before he had been able to distinguish its color, the animal jumped down, ran across the dining room and disappeared in the direction of the kitchen. Although he could not be quite sure, his heart swelled with a joyful hope at the thought that it

might be the cat he had seen a few hours before, lying motionless amongst the irises in Roberto's garden. And he was pleased at this hopeful feeling—a sign that, after all, the creature's life meant more to him than his own fate. "The cat!" he exclaimed loudly. And then, throwing down his napkin on the table and stretching out one leg at the side of his chair, he added, "Daddy, I've finished, can I get down?"

"You stay in your place," said his father in a menacing tone.

Marcello ventured nervously, "But the cat's alive. . . ."

"I've already told you to stay in your place," his father repeated decisively. And then, as though Marcello's speaking had broken the long silence for him too, he turned toward his wife and said, "Well, say something then . . . speak!"

"I've nothing to say," she answered with ostentatious dignity, her eyelids lowered, scorn on her lips. She was in evening dress, in a low-necked black gown, and Marcello noticed that she was holding tightly in her thin fingers a small handkerchief that she raised frequently to her nose, while with the other hand she kept seizing a piece of bread and then dropping it on to the table again but not with her fingers; merely with the points of her nails, like a bird.

"But say what you have to say . . . speak, for goodness' sake."

"To you I've nothing to say."

Only now did Marcello begin to understand that it was not the killing of the cat that had caused his parents' ill humor. And then everything seemed to come to a head. His father repeated once again, "Speak, for God's sake"; his mother's only reply was a shrug of the shoulders, and then his father seized the wine glass that stood beside his plate and, shouting in a loud voice, "Will you speak or will you not?" smashed it down on the table. The glass broke, his father, with a curse, raised his cut hand to his mouth, his mother rose in fright

from the table and went hastily toward the door. His father was sucking the blood from his hand almost with enjoyment, arching his eyebrows above his hand as he held it to his mouth; but on seeing his wife going away, he stopped sucking and shouted at her, "I forbid you to go away . . . d'you understand?" The only answer was a tempestuous slamming of the door. His father rose from the table and rushed in the same direction. Excited by the violence of the scene, Marcello followed him.

His father had already started up the stairs, his hand on the banister, without any further bluster or, apparently, any hurry. Marcello, coming behind him, saw that he was mounting the steps two at a time, almost as though he were flying silently towards the landing above—just like, Marcello thought, just like some orge in a fairy tale wearing the seven-league boots; and he did not for a moment doubt that this calculated, menacing ascent would get the better of the disorderly haste of his mother who, a little higher up, was scurrying up the stairs, one at a time, her legs hampered by her narrow skirt.

"Now he's going to kill her," he thought, as he followed his father. When she reached the landing his mother ran the short distance to her room, but not fast enough to prevent her husband pushing his way in behind her through the half-closed door. All this Marcello saw as he climbed up the stairs with his short, childish legs that allowed him neither to run up two steps at a time, like his father, nor to skip hastily up like his mother. As he arrived at the landing, he noticed the clatter of the pursuit had been succeeded, strangely, by a sudden silence. The door of his mother's room had been left open. Marcello, rather hesitantly, went forward and looked in.

At first all he could see was the two big, diaphanous window curtains at the other end of the almost dark room, one

on each side of the wide, low bed; these curtains were streaming into the room on a strong draft, borne up and up toward the ceiling until they almost touched the lamp hanging in the middle. Silent, glimmering white in mid-air in the dark room, they gave a feeling of emptiness, as though Marcello's parents, in their swift pursuit, had vanished from sight through the wide-open windows into the summer night. Then, in the streak of light that came through the door from the passage and reached as far as the bed, he saw his parents. Or rather he saw only his father's back, for beneath him his mother was almost invisible except for her hair spread over the pillow and one arm raised toward the head of the bed. This arm and hand were seeking, feverishly, to grasp the bed rail but without success; and in the meantime his father, crushing his wife's body beneath his own, was making movements with his shoulders and hands as if he wanted to strangle her. "He *is* killing her," thought Marcello with conviction, as he stood in the doorway.

He had, at that moment, an unaccustomed sensation of cruel, pugnacious excitement and at the same time a strong desire to intervene in the struggle—though whether to give a helping hand to his father or to defend his mother he did not know. Simultaneously he saw a ray of hope that his own crime might be wiped out by means of this other, far graver, crime, for what was the killing of a cat, compared with the killing of a woman? But at the very moment when, overcoming a final hesitation, he started forward from the door, fascinated and full of violent feelings, his mother's voice, in a tone that was far from strangled—that was, indeed, almost caressing—murmured gently, "Let me go"; and in direct contradiction to this request, the arm which she had been holding up in her attempt to catch hold of the bed rail moved downward and encircled her husband's neck. Astonished,

almost disappointed, Marcello retreated and went out again into the passage.

Very quietly, taking care to make no noise on the stairs, he went down to the ground floor and into the kitchen. Now again he was pricked by curiosity to know whether the cat that had jumped down from the dining-room window was the one he feared he had killed. When he pushed open the kitchen door, a quiet domestic scene was visible—the elderly cook and the young maid sitting together eating at the marble-topped table that stood between the electric stove and the refrigerator, in the white-painted room. And on the floor underneath the window was the cat, its pink tongue busy lapping milk from a bowl. But—as he at once saw, to his disappointment—it was not the gray cat, it was a tabby, and entirely different.

Not knowing how to justify his presence in the kitchen, he went over to the cat, stooped down and stroked its back. The cat, without interrupting its milk-lapping, began to purr. The cook, rising, went and closed the door. Then she opened the refrigerator, took out a plate with a slice of pudding on it, put it on the table, and drawing up a chair, said to Marcello, "Would you like a piece of last night's pudding? I put it aside specially for you." Marcello, without a word, left the cat, sat down and started eating the pudding.

"Well, there are some things I can't understand," said the maid. "They have so much time all day long, and plenty of room in the house, and yet they have to start quarreling at the table, with the boy there."

The cook replied, in a sententious tone of voice: "If you don't want to look after children, it's better not to bring them into the world."

"Why," observed the maid after a short silence, "why, he's

old enough to be her father . . . Of course they can't get on together."

"If *that* was all. . . ." said the cook, with a meaning glance in the direction of Marcello.

"Besides," continued the maid, "if you ask me, that man isn't normal."

At this word Marcello pricked up his ears, though he still went on slowly eating the pudding. "And *she* thinks just the same as me," pursued the maid. "D'you know that she said to me the other night when I was helping her undress? 'Giacomina, one of these days my husband'll kill me' . . . And I answered: 'But, ma'am, why don't you leave him then?' . . . and she. . . ."

"Sh. . . ." the cook interrupted her, with a nod at Marcello. The maid understood and asked Marcello, "Where are Daddy and Mummy?"

"Upstairs in the bedroom," answered Marcello. And then, as though urged by some irresistible impulse, "It's quite true that Daddy isn't normal. D'you know what he did?"

"No, what?"

"He killed a cat," said Marcello.

"A cat? And how did he do that?"

"With my slingshot . . . I saw him in the garden, following a gray cat that was walking along the wall. Then he took a stone and shot at the cat and hit it in the eye. . . . The cat fell into Roberto's garden and then I went to have a look and I saw that it was dead." As he spoke, he became increasingly vehement, but without ever losing the tone of voice of the innocent person who tells, with candid, unknowing ingenuousness, of some misdeed at which he has been present.

"Fancy that!" said the maid, clasping her hands together, "a cat . . . and a man of that age, a gentleman, taking his

son's slingshot and killing a cat! You don't have to tell me he's abnormal."

"A man who's unkind to animals is unkind to humans too," said the cook. "You begin by killing a cat and you end by killing a man."

"Why?" asked Marcello suddenly, raising his eyes from his plate.

"That's what they say," answered the cook, stroking his hair. "But you know," she went on, turning to the maid, "it's not always true . . . That man who killed all those people at Pistoia . . . I read about it in the paper . . . d'you know what he does now, in prison? He keeps a canary."

The pudding was finished. Marcello rose and went out of the kitchen.

CHAPTER TWO

DURING the summer at the seaside, Marcello's dread of what fate held in store for him—so simply expressed by the cook when she said, "You begin by killing a cat and you end by killing a man"—faded gradually from his mind. He still thought often of that inscrutable, pitiless mechanism in which his life seemed, for some days, to have become entangled, but he thought of it with a steadily diminishing fear, and more as an alarm signal than as the verdict without appeal that for some time had terrified him. The days passed happily, with their burning sunshine and their intoxicating saltness, with their variety of amusements and discoveries; and Marcello, each day that passed, felt that he had won some kind of victory, not so much over himself—since he had never been conscious of guilt of a deliberate, direct kind—as over that obscure, malevolent, cunning, external force, darkly tinged with doom and misfortune, that had led him on, almost against his will, from destruction of the flowers to the slaughter of the lizards and thence to the attempt to kill Roberto. He felt this force to be ever-present and menacing though no longer crushing; but—as sometimes happens in nightmares when, terrified by the presence of a monster, you think you

can fool it by pretending to be asleep, whereas of course the whole thing is a dream and you really are asleep—so it seemed to him that, since he could not free himself once and for all from the threat of this force, the best plan was to lull it to sleep by feigning a carefree forgetfulness he was still far from having attained.

It was one of the most unrestrained, if not the happiest, of Marcello's summer holidays, and it was certainly the last of his life in which he was a child without any distaste for childishness or any desire to escape from it. His heedlessness was partly due to the natural inclination of his age, but partly due also to his wish to escape at all costs from the evil circle of foreboding and doom. Marcello was not aware of it, but the impulse that drove him to hurl himself into the sea ten times a morning, to compete in boisterousness with the most boisterous of his playfellows, to row for hours on the scorching sea, in fact to do all the things that are done at seaside places with a kind of exaggerated enthusiasm, was exactly the same impulse that had driven him to try and make Roberto his accomplice after the slaughter of the lizards and to seek to get himself punished by his parents after the death of the cat. It was a desire for normality, a wish to conform to a recognized, general rule; a longing to be like everyone else, inasmuch as to be different meant to be guilty. But the deliberate, artificial quality of his behavior was brought to light, every now and then, by a sudden, painful recollection of the dead cat lying among the white and purple irises in Roberto's garden.

This recollection frightened him, as a debtor is frightened by the memory of his own signature at the bottom of a document acknowledging his debt. It seemed to him that, with that death, he had taken upon himself a vague but terrible obligation from which, sooner or later, he would not

be able to extricate himself, even though he were to hide himself under the earth or cross the oceans so that all trace of him was lost. At such moments he consoled himself with the thought that a month, two months, three months had passed; that soon a year, two years, three years would have gone by; that, in fact, the most important things were, not to arouse the monster, and to make the time pass quickly. In any case these attacks of discouragement and fear were rare, and toward the end of the summer they ceased altogether. When Marcello went back to Rome, all that he retained of the cat episode and of the other episodes that had preceded it was a hazy, almost imperceptible memory, as of something that he had perhaps experienced, but in another life with which he now had no connection whatsoever except a vague remembrance that was devoid both of responsibility and of consequences.

His forgetfulness was aided, once he had returned home, by the excitement of going to school. Marcello had hitherto had lessons at home, and this was his first year of school. The novelty of his schoolfellows, of the teachers, the classrooms, the schedules—a novelty in which an idea of order and discipline and shared occupations was always discernible, under a variety of aspects—was extremely pleasing to him after the disorder, the lack of rules, the loneliness of his own home. It was rather like the boarding school he had dreamed about that day at the table, but without constraint or servitude, with only its pleasant sides and without those unpleasant ones that made it like a prison.

Marcello very soon realized that he had a profound liking for school life. He enjoyed getting up punctually in the morning, washing and dressing in a hurry, wrapping up his textbooks and exercise-books tightly and neatly in the piece of oilcloth with elastic fastenings, and hurrying off through

the streets to the school. He enjoyed rushing into the old school building with a crowd of his schoolfellows, running up the dirty staircases, through the dreary, echoing corridors, and then suddenly slowing down when he came into the classroom among the rows of benches in front of the still unoccupied teacher's desk. He enjoyed above all the ritual of the lessons—the entrance of the teacher, the roll call, the questions, the rivalry with the other boys in giving answers and the victories and defeats in that rivalry, the quiet, impersonal tone of the teacher's voice, the very manner, so eloquent in itself, in which the classroom was arranged, with the rows of boys, all sharing the same need to learn, facing the teacher as he instructed them.

Marcello, however, was a mediocre scholar, and in certain subjects he was among the very last in the class. What he loved about school was not so much the lessons as the entirely new mode of life, which suited his tastes much better than the way he had lived hitherto. Again it was normality that attracted him; and all the more in that he discovered it to be not a casual matter nor one that was dependent upon the preferences and natural inclinations of the mind, but a thing pre-established, impartial, indifferent to individual tastes, both limited and upheld by authoritative rules that were all directed toward one single purpose.

But his candor and lack of experience made him awkward and insecure before those other rules, unspoken but existent nevertheless, the rules that concerned the relationships of the boys with each other, outside of school discipline. This too was an aspect of the new normality, but one that was more difficult to master. He was made aware of it the first time he was called up to the desk to show his written exercise. When the teacher had taken the exercise-book from him and, having put it in front of him on the desk, was preparing to

read it, Marcello, accustomed to the affectionate and familiar relationships he had had with the governesses who had hitherto taught him at home, instead of standing aside on the platform as he waited for the teacher's criticism, placed his arm, in a perfectly natural way, round the latter's shoulders and brought his face close to his, in order to follow him as he read the exercise. The teacher, without showing any surprise, merely removed the hand Marcello had laid on his shoulder and freed himself from his arm; but the whole class burst into noisy laughter in which Marcello seemed to detect a disapproval that was different from that of the teacher and much less indulgent and understanding. Later, as soon as he had managed to overcome his embarrassment and shame, he realized that his innocent gesture had caused him to fall short of two different standards at the same time —the scholastic standard requiring him to be disciplined and respectful toward his teacher, and the boys' standard requiring him to be crafty and to hide his feelings. And— what was even more curious—these two standards did not contradict, but actually complemented each other in some mysterious way.

Yet, as he at once realized, if it was fairly easy to become a competent scholar in quite a short time, it was much more difficult to become a shrewd, self-possessed schoolboy. This latter transformation was made difficult by his lack of experience, his family habits and even his physical appearance. Marcello had inherited from his mother a perfection of feature almost extravagant in its regularity and charm. His face was round, with brown, delicate cheeks, a small nose, a curving mouth which wore a capricious, rather sullen expression, a pronounced chin and, beneath the fringe of chestnut hair almost entirely covering his brow, eyes which were somewhere between gray and blue, slightly somber,

although their expression was innocent and caressing. It was almost the face of a girl; but raw boys would probably not have noticed this had it not been that the charm and beauty of the face were stressed by certain truly feminine characteristics in Marcello that made one wonder whether he might not be a girl dressed up as a boy—an unusual facility for blushing, an irresistible tendency to display his affectionate nature by caressing gestures, a desire to please that was carried even to servility and coquettishness. These qualities were innate in Marcello though he was unconscious of them. When he became aware that they made him ridiculous in the eyes of the other boys, it was already too late. Even if he had been able, if not to eliminate, at least to control them, his reputation as a little girl in trousers was already established.

They teased him almost automatically, as though his feminine character were by now an accepted thing. They would ask him, with pretended seriousness, why in the world he did not sit at the benches where the girls sat, and what was the idea of putting on pants instead of a skirt; or how he spent his time at home, doing needlework or playing with dolls; or why hadn't he had his ears pierced for earrings. Sometimes, underneath the desk where he sat, he would find a piece of cloth and a needle and a ball of wool, put there to show him the kind of work he ought to be engaged in. Sometimes it was a box of face powder. One morning it was actually a pink brassière that one of the boys had stolen from his elder sister. And from the very beginning they had transformed his name into a feminine diminutive and called him Marcellina. These buffooneries provoked a feeling of anger mixed with a kind of flattered complacency in him, as though one part of him were not at all dissatisfied; but he could not have told whether this complacency arose from

the character of the buffooneries or from the fact that his companions took notice of him, even if it was only to laugh at him.

One morning when as usual they were whispering behind his back, "Marcellina . . . Marcellina . . . is it true you wear woman's drawers?" he stood up and, having raised his arm for permission to speak, complained in a loud voice, amid the sudden silence of the class, of being called by a woman's name. The teacher, a big, bearded, coarse-looking man, listened to him with a smile that was half hidden by the hairs of his gray beard, and then said, "So they call you by a woman's name, do they? . . . And what is it?"

"Marcellina," said Marcello.

"And you don't like it?"

"No, I don't . . . because I'm a man."

"Come up here," said the teacher. Marcello obeyed and went and stood beside the desk. "Now," went on the teacher in a pleasant voice, "show the class your muscles."

Marcello obediently bent his arm, expanding his muscles. The teacher leant forward in his chair, felt his arm, shook his head in ironical approval, and then, turning to the class, said, "As you can see, Clerici is a strong fellow . . . and he's prepared to show he's a man and not a woman . . . Who's going to challenge him?"

A long silence followed. The teacher looked all around the class and then concluded: "No one . . . well, that's a sign that you're afraid of him. Then you must stop calling him Marcellina." The whole class burst out laughing. Marcello, red in the face, went back to his seat. But from that day on, instead of stopping, the teasing was redoubled, aggravated partly by the fact that Marcello had, as they told him, behaved like a sneak, breaking the unspoken law of solidarity that bound the boys together.

Marcello realized that in order to stop them from teasing him he must give his schoolfellows some proof that he was not as effiminate as he seemed; but he knew instinctively that such proof required something more than a mere showing off of his arm muscles in the way the teacher had made him do. Something more unusual was needed, something that would strike the boys' imaginations and arouse admiration. What?

He could not have said it in so many words, but in a general sense what was needed was some action or some object that would suggest the idea of force, of manliness, if not actually of brutality. He had noticed that they all had a great admiration for a boy called Avanzini because he was the possessor of a pair of big leather boxing gloves. Avanzini, a slight, fair boy, smaller than he and not as strong, did not even know how to use these boxing gloves; yet they had brought him a special sort of consideration. The same sort of admiration was also given to a boy named Pugliese because he knew—or rather claimed to know—a certain Japanese wrestling trick which, according to him, was infallible for putting your opponent on the floor. It was true that Pugliese had never been able to make the trick work, but this did not prevent the boys respecting him in the same way they respected Avanzini. Marcello was aware that as soon as possible he must show himself to be in possession of some object such as the boxing gloves, or must devise some form of prowess such as the Japanese wrestling. He was also aware that he was not so frivolous or amateurish as his companions but belonged, whether he liked it or not, to the breed of those who take life and its obligations seriously; and that, in Avanzini's place, he would have broken the noses of his enemies, and in Pugliese's, would have twisted their necks. The knowledge that he was incapable of being merely rhetorical and superficial inspired in him a vague mistrust

of himself; and while he longed to furnish his companions with the proof of strength they appeared to demand from him in exchange for their respect, he was at the same time vaguely frightened of it.

One day he noticed a few of the boys, who were usually among the most determined of his tormentors, confabulating together. He thought he understood from their glances that they were devising some new joke against him. Lesson time, however, passed without incident, though looks and whispers confirmed him in his suspicions. When the class was dismissed Marcello, without looking round, went off toward home. It was early in November, the air was stormy but mild, and in it the last warmth and smell of the now dead summer seemed to mingle with the first, still hesitant harshness of autumn. Marcello felt vaguely excited by this atmosphere of natural decay and devastation; he detected a restless desire for destruction and death very similar to the desire, months before, that had urged him on to decapitate the flowers and kill the lizards. Summer had been a season of stillness, of perfection, of abundance, with clear skies and trees covered with leaves and branches full of birds. It was with delight that he now saw the autumn wind demolishing and tearing to pieces that perfection, that abundance, that stillness, driving dark, ragged clouds across the sky, snatching the leaves from the trees and whirling them on the ground, chasing away the birds that one could see, between leaves and clouds, in black, orderly bands on their migratory flight.

At a turn in the street, he noticed a group of five of his schoolmates following him, and there could be no doubt they were following *him* because two of them lived in the opposite direction; but, engrossed in his autumnal enjoyments, he paid no special attention to them. He was in a hurry now to reach

the big avenue planted with plane trees from which a side road led to his home. He knew that on the pavements of this avenue the dead leaves were piled up by thousands, yellow and rustling; and he had a foretaste of the pleasure he would derive from dragging his feet through the piles of leaves, scattering them and enjoying the sound they made. In the meantime, almost for fun, he tried to make his pursuers lose track of him, going now into a doorway and now mixing with the crowd. But every time, as he soon saw, the five boys after a moment's hesitation found him again. The avenue was quite close now; and Marcello was ashamed of being seen amusing himself with the dead leaves. So he decided to face them, and, turning suddenly, asked, "Why are you following me?" One of the five, a fair boy with a sharp face and a close-cropped head, answered promptly, "We're not following you. The street belongs to everybody, doesn't it?" Marcello said nothing and walked on.

Soon he came to the avenue with its two rows of enormous, bare plane trees and the line of many-windowed houses behind the trees, and here were the dead leaves, yellow as gold, scattered over the black asphalt and piled up in the gutters. He could not see the five boys now. Perhaps they had stopped following him and he was alone in the wide avenue with its deserted pavements. Without hurrying, he thrust his feet into the leaves that lay thick on the ground and started walking slowly, enjoying the sensation of plunging up to his knees in the light, shifting mass of rustling foliage. As he stooped to pick up a handful of leaves, intending to throw them up in the air, he heard again the mocking voices, "Marcellina . . . Marcellina . . . show us your drawers." Then there came over him, all at once, a longing to fight, an almost pleasant sensation that lit up his face with pug-

nacious excitement. He stood up and moved in a determined fashion toward his persecutors, saying, "Will you go away —or won't you?"

Instead of answering, all five of them threw themselves upon him. Marcello had intended to behave rather like the Horatii and the Curiatii in the history books—to take them one at a time, running here and there dealing violent blows at each of them until he compelled them to abandon their undertaking. But he realized at once that this plan was impossible; the five boys had had the foresight to close in tightly upon him, and now one of them had hold of his arms, another his legs and two of them of his body. The fifth, he could see, had in the meantime hastily opened a parcel, and now approached him cautiously with a little girl's blue cotton petticoat dangling from his hands. They were all laughing as they held him, and the one with the petticoat said, "Come on, Marcellina . . . it's no use resisting . . . we're going to put this petticoat on you and then we'll let you go home to Mummy."

This was exactly the kind of joke that Marcello had foreseen—a joke that was, as usual, connected with his insufficiently masculine appearance. Furious, scarlet in the face. he started struggling as hard as he could; but the five of them were too strong for him and, although he succeeded in scratching the face of one of them and in planting a blow in the stomach of another, he felt his own movements were gradually weakening. Finally, as he was moaning, "Let me go . . . let me go," there was a cry of triumph from his tormentors; the petticoat was slipped over his head, and his protests were smothered inside a kind of bag. He went on struggling, but in vain. Skilfully the boys pulled the petticoat down to his waist, and he felt them knotting it at the back. And then, just as they were shouting. "Pull it . . . come on

. . . pull it tighter!" he heard a quiet voice asking, in a tone more of curiosity than of reproof, "May one ask what you're doing?"

Immediately the five boys let him go and ran off and he found himself alone again, all untidy and out of breath, with the petticoat tied round his waist. He raised his eyes and saw standing in front of him the man whose voice he had heard. Dressed in a dark-gray uniform with a high, tight collar, pale, lean, with deep-set eyes, a large, melancholy nose, a scornful mouth and hair *en brosse,* he gave an impression at first glance of exaggerated austerity. But when you looked at him again—Marcello observed—you saw he had certain characteristics that had nothing austere about them—quite the contrary, in fact; an anxious, eager look in his eye, a certain softness, almost looseness, in his mouth, a general lack of self-confidence in his whole demeanor. He stooped down and picked up the books Marcello had dropped during his struggles, as he handed them to him and he said, "What were they trying to do to you?"

His voice too, like his face, was severe, but at the same time it was not without a certain strangled gentleness. Marcello, irritated, replied, "They're always playing tricks on me . . . they're a lot of fools." Meanwhile he was trying to undo the knot in the belt of the petticoat.

"Wait a minute," said the man, stooping down and untying it. The petticoat fell to the ground and Marcello stepped out of it, first trampling on it and then kicking it on to a heap of dead leaves. The man asked him, in a timid sort of way, "You were on your way home, were you?"

"Yes," said Marcello, raising his eyes and looking at him.

"Well," said the man, "I'll take you there in my car"; and he pointed to a motorcar standing not far off beside the pavement. Marcello looked; it was a car of a make he

did not know, possibly a foreign one, long, black, old-fashioned. It came into his head that this car, standing there a few paces away from them, implied premeditation in the man's apparently casual approach. He hesitated before answering; the man insisted, "Come along . . . before I take you home I'll take you for a nice ride, shall I?"

Marcello wanted to refuse, or rather he felt he ought to refuse. But he did not have time; the man had already taken the bundle of books from him, saying, "I'll carry them," and was walking to the car. He followed, slightly surprised at his own docility but not at all displeased. The man opened the door, made Marcello get into the front, and flung the books onto the back seat. Then he took his place at the wheel, closed the door, put on his gloves and started the engine.

The car moved in a leisurely, majestic fashion, with a subdued humming, down the long tree-lined avenue. It was indeed an old-fashioned car, Marcello thought, but it had been kept in perfect condition, with all its brasswork and nickel fittings lovingly polished and shining. And now the man, holding the wheel with one hand, picked up a peaked cap and put it on his head. The cap emphasized the severity of his appearance, adding an almost military air. Marcello, embarrassed, asked him, "Is it your car?"

"No," said the man without turning his head, at the same time moving his right hand to sound the horn, which had a solemn tone and was just as old-fashioned as the car itself. "No, it's not mine . . . it belongs to my employer . . . I'm the chauffeur."

Marcello said nothing. The man, still without turning his head and driving with detached, elegant precision, went on, "D'you mind my not being the owner? Does it make you ashamed?"

Marcello eagerly protested. "No, of course not . . . Why should it?"

The man gave a faint smile of satisfaction and accelerated. "We'll go up the hill a bit now . . . up on to Monte Mario, shall we?" he said.

"I've never been there," answered Marcello.

"It's fine up there," said the man; "you can see the whole town." He was silent for a moment and then added, very gently, "What's your name?"

"Marcello."

"Yes, of course," said the man, as though talking to himself. "They were calling you Marcellina, those friends of yours . . . My name's Pasquale."

Marcello had hardly time to think that Pasquale was a ridiculous name before the man, as though he had read his thought, added, "But it's a ridiculous name . . . You call me Lino."

The car was now passing through the wide and dirty streets of a working-class quarter, between blocks of dreary tenements. Groups of urchins playing in the middle of the street scampered out of the way, bareheaded women and ragged-looking men on the pavements stared at the unusual spectacle. Marcello lowered his eyes, embarrassed at all this curiosity. "This is il Triofale here," said the man, "but we're just coming to Monte Mario." The car left the poor quarter, coming out, just behind a trolley, into a wide road that wound up the hill between two rows of houses. "What time d'you have to be home?"

"There's lots of time," said Marcello; "we never have lunch before two."

"Who is there at your home? Father and mother?"

"Yes."

"Have you any brothers and sisters?"

"No."

"And what does your father do?"

"He doesn't do anything," replied Marcello rather hesitatingly.

The car overtook the trolley at a turn, and the man, in order to take the curve as sharply as possible, merely pressed down his arms on the steering wheel, not moving his body, with a dexterity that was full of elegance. Then the car, still going uphill, passed alongside high, grass-grown walls, iron gates of villas and hedges of elder trees. Every now and then a doorway decorated with Venetian lanterns or an arch with a crimson-painted sign revealed the presence of some restaurant or rustic inn. Lino asked, "Do your father and mother give you presents?"

"Yes," answered Marcello vaguely. "Sometimes."

"Many or few?"

Marcello did not want to confess how few his presents were, or that sometimes even birthdays and similar occasions went past without any at all. So all he answered was, "Not too bad."

"D'you like getting presents?" asked Lino, opening the dashboard compartment and taking out a yellow cloth, with which he wiped the windshield.

Marcello looked at him. Lino was still looking straight ahead, his body erect, the peak of his cap well down over his eyes. "Yes, I do," said Marcello in a haphazard sort of way.

"What, for instance, would you like as a present?"

This time there could be no doubt about his meaning, and Marcello could not but think that the mysterious Lino, for some reason of his own, really intended to give him a present. He remembered in a flash the great attraction that weapons had for him, and at the same time, with the feeling

of making a discovery, he said to himself that the possession of a real weapon would ensure the consideration and respect of his schoolfellows. Rather skeptically, for he was conscious of asking too much, he hazarded: "Well, a revolver, for instance . . . ."

"A revolver?" the man repeated, without showing any surprise. "What sort of revolver? A revolver with cartridges or a compressed air revolver?"

"No," said Marcello boldly; "a real revolver."

"And what would you do with a real revolver?"

Marcello preferred not to give his real reason. "I'd practice shooting at a target," he replied, "until I felt I was a crack shot."

"But why d'you want so much to be a crack shot?"

Marcello thought the man was asking all these questions to make him talk than from real curiosity. But he answered seriously, "If you're a good shot you can defend yourself against anybody."

The man was silent for a moment. Then he said, "Put your hand in that pocket, there, in the door beside you."

Marcello, his interest aroused, did as he was told and felt, beneath his fingers, the coldness of some metal object. "Pull it out," said the man.

The car swerved suddenly to avoid a dog crossing the road. Marcello pulled out the metal object; it was a revolver, black, flat, laden with destruction and death, its barrel projecting forward as though to spit out the bullets. Almost unwittingly, his fingers trembling with satisfaction, he grasped the butt in his fist. "A revolver like that?" asked Lino.

"Yes," said Marcello.

"Well," said Lino, "if you really want it I'll give you one . . . Not that one; it belongs to the car, but another one just like it."

Marcello said nothing. He felt he was living a fairy-tale world, a world quite different from the usual one, in which unknown motorists invited him to go for car rides and presented him with revolvers. Everything seemed to have become extraordinarily easy; but for some reason he could not understand he felt that this quality of easiness, appetizing as it was, might prove on further trial to have an unpleasant taste, as though some hidden difficulty, still unknown but menacing and soon to be revealed, were bound up with it. Probably, he thought quite coolly, each of them sitting there in the car had his own purpose; his was to get possession of a revolver, Lino's to obtain, in exchange for the revolver, something still mysterious and probably disagreeable. It now remained to be seen which of the two would get the best of the bargain. "Where are we going?" he asked.

Lino answered: "We're going to the house where I live . . . to fetch the revolver."

"And where is the house?"

"We're just about there," the man replied, taking the revolver from his hand and putting it in his pocket.

Marcello looked. The car had stopped in a road that looked like an ordinary country road, with trees and elder-bush hedges, and, beyond the hedges, fields and the sky. But a little farther on was an arched gateway with two pillars and a wrought-iron gate painted green. "Wait here," said Lino. He got out and went to the gateway. Marcello watched him as he threw open the two leaves of the gate and then turned back again. He was not tall, although when he was sitting down he looked it; his legs were short in proportion to his body, and he was broad in the hips. Lino got into the car again and drove it through the gateway. A graveled drive came into sight between two rows of small, scraggy cypresses which were being battered and bent by the stormy

wind. At the far end of the drive, in a thin ray of sunshine, something glittered incongruously against the background of thundery sky. It was the glass of a veranda projecting from the side of a two-story building. "There's the villa," said Lino, "but there's nobody there."

"Who does it belong to?" asked Marcello.

"It belongs to a lady," said Lino, "an American lady . . . but she's away, at Florence."

The car stopped in front of the house. It was a long, low building, in which expanses of white cement and red brick alternated with the reflecting stripes of window glass, and it had a colonnade of square pillars of undressed stone. Lino opened the door of the car and jumped out, saying, "Come on, let's get out."

Marcello did not know what Lino wanted of him, nor could he succeed in guessing. But the feeling of mistrust was increasing steadily within him, the mistrust of someone who is afraid of being taken in. "How about the revolver?" he asked, without moving.

"It's in there," said Lino rather impatiently, indicating the windows of the villa; "we'll go and fetch it now."

"You're going to give it to me?"

"Yes, of course—a fine new revolver."

Without another word, Marcello got out of the car. He was at once struck by a gust of warm, dust-laden air from the intoxicating, mournful autumnal wind. He did not know why, but that gust of wind brought with it a kind of presentiment, and as he followed Lino he turned to give a last look at the graveled space in front of the house bordered with shrubs and stunted oleanders. Lino walked ahead of him, and he noticed that there was a bulge in the side pocket of his tunic: it was the revolver which he had taken out of his hand as they arrived. Suddenly he was certain that Lino

had no other revolver in his possession, and he wondered why on earth he had lied to him and why he was now dragging him into the house. The feeling that he was being deceived grew stronger, and with it the determination to keep his eyes open and not to let himself be deceived. In the meantime they had come into a large sort of lounge hall in which were groups of armchairs and sofas, with a hooded fireplace of red brick in the far wall. Lino, still walking in front of Marcello, went across the room toward a blue-painted door in one corner. Marcello asked anxiously, "Where are we going?"

"We're going to my room," Lino answered lightly, without turning around.

Marcello made up his mind that, as a precaution, he would put up some preliminary resistance, so that Lino should understand that he had seen through his little game. He stayed some distance away when Lino opened the blue door, and said, "Give me the revolver at once or I'll go away."

"But I haven't got the revolver here," replied Lino, turning half around. "It's in my room."

"Yes, you have got it," said Marcello. "It's in your pocket."

"No, that's the one that belongs to the car."

"You haven't got any other one."

A slightly impatient movement on Lino's part was quickly suppressed. Marcello noticed again how the softness of his mouth and the anxious, suffering, imploring look in his eyes contrasted with the rest of his thin, severe face. "I'll give you this one," he said finally; "but come with me . . . what's the matter? . . . we might be seen here by one of the country people—with all these windows . . . "

"And what's the harm if they do see us?" was the question Marcello would have liked to ask; but he refrained, because

he was aware, in some obscure way, that there *was* harm in it, though he could not have defined it. "All right," he said in a childish sort of way; "but you'll give it to me afterward, won't you?"

"Don't worry."

They went into a small, white passage and Lino closed the door. At the other end of the passage there was another blue door. This time Lino did not walk in front of Marcello, but moved to his side and put his arm lightly round his waist. "Are you really so very keen on having your revolver?" he asked.

"Yes," said Marcello, almost incapable of speaking, so embarrassed was he by the man's arm.

Lino removed his arm, opened the door and ushered Marcello into his room. It was a small, white room, long and narrow, with a window at the far end. There was nothing in it but a bed, a table, a cupboard and a couple of chairs. All these pieces of furniture were painted a light green. Marcello noticed an ordinary bronze crucifix hanging on the wall over the head of the bed. On the bedside table lay a thick book, bound in black with red edges, that Marcello judged was a book of devotions. The room, empty of small objects and of clothes, looked extraordinarily clean, but there was a strong smell in the air, like the smell of Eau de Cologne soap. Where had he smelt it before? In the bathroom at home, perhaps, just after his mother had been there in the morning. Lino said to him, in a careless sort of way, "Sit down on the bed, won't you? . . . it's more comfortable"; and he obeyed in silence. Lino was moving around the room now. He took off his cap and put it on the window sill; he unbuttoned his collar and wiped away the sweat from around his neck with a handkerchief. Then he opened the cupboard, took out a big bottle of Eau de Cologne, wet

the handkerchief and moved it with relief over his face and his forehead. "Won't you have some too?" he asked Marcello, "it's refreshing."

Marcello would have liked to refuse, for both the bottle and the handkerchief filled him with a kind of disgust. But he allowed Lino to pass the palm of his hand, in a cool caress, over his face. Lino put the Eau de Cologne back in the cupboard and came and sat down on the bed, facing Marcello.

They looked at each other. Lino's thin, austere face had now taken on a new expression, yearning, caressing, imploring. He gazed at Marcello and was silent. Marcello, losing patience—and also to put a stop to this embarrassing contemplation—at last asked, "How about the revolver?"

Lino sighed and pulled the weapon, as though unwillingly, out of his pocket. Marcello put out his hand, but Lino's expression hardened and he withdrew the revolver again, saying hurriedly, "I'll give it to you . . . but you must deserve it first."

Marcello felt almost a relief at these words. So it was as he had thought; Lino wanted something in exchange for the revolver. In an eager, falsely ingenuous tone of voice, as when at school he was swapping pens or marbles, he said, "You say what you want in exchange and then we'll come to an agreement."

He saw Lino lower his eyes and hesitate; then he said slowly, "What would you do to get this revolver?"

He noticed that Lino had avoided his question: so it was not a matter of some object to be exchanged for the revolver but of something that he had to do in order to get it. Although he did not understand what it could be, he said, still in that same falsely ingenuous tone, "I don't know; you must tell me."

There was a moment's silence. "Would you do *anything?*" Lino asked all at once, in a louder voice, grasping Marcello's hand.

Both the tone of voice and the gesture alarmed Marcello. He wondered whether by any chance Lino was a thief and was trying to make him into an accomplice. However, after a moment's consideration, he decided that he could reject this possibility. Cautiously, he answered, "What is it you want me to do? Why don't you tell me?"

Lino was playing with his hand now, looking at it, turning it about, squeezing it and then relaxing his pressure. Then, almost roughly, he thrust it away from him and said slowly, looking at him, "I'm sure there are some things you wouldn't do."

"Well, tell me what you mean," Marcello insisted, a sort of good will mingling with his embarrassment.

"No, no," Lino protested.

Marcello noticed that his pale face was tinged with a curious, uneven redness on the cheekbones. It seemed to him that Lino was tempted to speak, but wanted to be sure that he himself wished him to. He then made a gesture of quite conscious, though innocent, coquettishness. He leaned forward, put out his hand and took the man's hand in his, saying, "Come on, tell me; why won't you tell me?"

A long silence followed. Lino looked now at Marcello's hand, now at his smiling face, and appeared to be hesitating. At last he thrust the boy's hand away from him again, but gently this time; then rose and took a few steps about the room. Then he sat down and again took Marcello's hand in an affectionate manner, rather like a father or mother taking the hand of a son. Marcello," he said, "do you know who I am?"

"No."

"I'm an unfrocked priest," Lino burst out in an afflicted, heart-stricken, piteous voice, "an unfrocked priest, driven out in disgrace from the college where I was teaching . . . And you, in your innocence, don't understand what I could be asking you for in exchange for this revolver that you covet so much . . . And I was tempted to take advantage of your ignorance, your innocence, your childish greed ! . . . That's who I am, Marcello." He spoke in a tone of deep sincerity; then turned toward the head of the bed and unexpectedly addressed the crucifix without raising his voice, as if in lamentation: "I have prayed to You so much . . . but You have forsaken me . . . And always, always I fall again . . . Why have You forsaken me?" These words were lost in a sort of murmur, as though Lino were speaking to himself. Then he rose from the bed, went over and took up his cap from the window sill, and said to Marcello, "Come along . . . let's go . . . I'll take you home."

Marcello said nothing. He felt stunned and incapable for the moment of assessing what had happened. He followed Lino along the passage and across the hall. Outside, in front of the house, the wind was still blowing around the big black motorcar, beneath a cloudy, sunless sky. Lino got into the car and he sat beside him. The car moved down the drive and went gently out through the archway into the road. For a long time they did not speak. Lino drove as before, his body erect, the peak of his cap down over his eyes, his gloved hands resting on the wheel. They had covered a long stretch of road before Lino, without turning his head, asked, "Are you sorry you didn't get the revolver?"

These words rekindled in Marcello's mind the eager hope that he might yet possess the coveted object. After all, he persuaded himself, there might still be a chance that all was

not lost. He answered with sincerity, "Yes, of course I'm sorry."

"Well then," said Lino, "if I promised to meet you tomorrow at the same time—would you come?"

"Tomorrow's Sunday," said Marcello judiciously, "but Monday would be all right . . . We could meet in the avenue, at the same place."

The other was silent for a moment. Then, suddenly, in a loud and mournful voice, he cried, "Don't speak to me any more . . . don't look at me . . . and if on Monday you see me in the avenue at midday, don't take any notice of me, don't greet me—d'you understand?"

Whatever's wrong with him, Marcello wondered rather angrily. "I don't particularly want to see you," he answered, "it was you who made me go home with you today."

"Yes, but it mustn't happen again . . . never again," said Lino forcibly. "I know myself, and I know for certain that I shall be thinking of you all night . . . and that on Monday I shall be waiting for you in the avenue even if today I make up my mind not to . . . I know myself . . . but you're not to take any notice of me."

Marcello said nothing. Lino went on in the same violent manner: "I shall be thinking about you all night, Marcello . . . and on Monday I shall be at the avenue . . . with the revolver . . . but you're not to take any notice of me." He kept on turning the same phrase round and round and repeating it; and Marcello, with cool, innocent perspicacity, saw that Lino really did want to make an appointment with him and, with the excuse of putting him on his guard, was in fact doing so. Lino, after a moment's silence, asked him again, "Did you hear what I said?"

"Yes."

"What did I say?"

"That you'd be waiting for me at the avenue on Monday."

"That wasn't all I said," replied the other sadly.

"And that," Marcello concluded, "I'm not to take any notice of you."

"That's right," Lino confirmed, "not on any account . . . very likely I shall call out to you, beseech you, follow you in the car . . . promise you everything you want . . . but you're to go straight on and pay no attention to me."

Marcello, losing patience, answered, "All right, all right, I understand."

"But you're only a child," said Lino, passing from violence to a kind of caressing gentleness, "and you won't be able to resist me . . . of course you'll come . . . you're just a child, Marcello."

Marcello was offended. "I'm not a child. I'm a boy . . . and anyhow you don't know me."

Lino suddenly stopped the car. They were still on the hill, underneath a high garden wall, and a little further on was the archway, adorned with Venetian lanterns, of a restaurant. Lino turned toward Marcello. "Truly," he said to him with a kind of painful anxiety, "truly you *will* refuse to come with me?"

"But isn't it you yourself," said Marcello, conscious, now, of what he was aiming at, "isn't it you yourself who are asking me to come?"

"Yes, it's true," said Lino despairingly, starting the car again. "Yes, it's true . . . you're right . . . madman that I am, that's just what I'm doing . . . of course I am."

After this exclamation he said no more, and there was silence. The car went down the hill and passed again through the dirty streets of the working-class quarter. Then they reached the big avenue with the tall, pale, leafless plane trees,

the heaped-up yellow leaves along the deserted pavements, the high buildings with their rows upon rows of windows. Soon they were in the quarter in which Marcello's home lay. Lino, without turning his head, asked: "Where's the house?"

"You'd better stop here," said Marcello, well aware of the pleasure that this sign of complicity was giving; "otherwise they might see me getting out of the car."

The car stopped. Marcello got out and Lino handed him his packet of books through the window, saying in a decided tone: "Till Monday then, in the avenue, at the same place."

"But I," said Marcello, taking the books, "I'm to pretend not to see you—isn't that so?"

Seeing Lino hesitate, he felt a kind of cruel satisfaction. Lino's eyes, burning intensely in their deep sockets, were brooding over him now with a look of entreaty and anguish. Then he burst out passionately, "Do as you like . . . do just as you like with me." His voice trailed off in a sort of sing-song, yearning lament.

"I daresay I shan't even look at you," Marcello warned him for the last time.

Lino made a gesture that Marcello did not understand but which seemed to him to indicate a despairing assent. Then the car drove off, moving slowly away in the direction of the avenue.

CHAPTER THREE

EVERY morning Marcello was called at a fixed time by the cook, who had a particular affection for him. She would come into the room in the dark, carrying the breakfast tray, and put it down on the marble top of the chest of drawers. Then Marcello would see her taking the cord of the shutter with both hands and pulling it up with two or three jerks of her robust body. She would put the tray on his knees and stand watching him while he ate his breakfast, ready, the moment he had finished, to throw off his bed covers and urge him to get dressed. She herself helped him, handing him his clothes, sometimes kneeling down and tying his shoes. She was a lively, cheerful woman, full of good sense; and she had retained the accent and the affectionate ways of the province where she had been born.

Marcello woke up on Monday with a confused recollection of having heard an uproar of angry voices the evening before, while he was going to sleep—voices coming either from the ground floor or from his parents' bedroom. He waited till he had finished his breakfast and then casually asked the cook, who as usual was standing beside the bed, "What was going on last night?"

The woman looked at him with feigned, exaggerated surprise. "Nothing, as far as I know," she said.

Marcello saw that she had something to tell him: the false surprise, the knowing glint in her eye, her whole attitude showed it plainly. "I heard shouts . . . " he said.

"Ah, the shouting," said the woman; "but that's quite normal . . . Don't you know that your Daddy and Mummy often shout at each other?"

"Yes," said Marcello, "but they were shouting louder than usual."

She smiled and, leaning with both hands on the head of the bed, said, "Anyhow, they must have understood each other better by shouting, don't you think?"

This was one of her little tricks—asking questions that expected no answer, questions that were really statements. Marcello asked, "But what were they shouting about?"

The woman smiled again. "Why do people shout?" she said. "Because they don't agree."

"And why don't they agree?"

"What, those two?" she cried, enjoying the boy's questions. "Oh, for hundreds of reasons . . . why, perhaps because one day your Mummy wants to sleep with the window open and your Daddy doesn't . . . another day, because *he* wants to go to bed early and *she* wants to sit up late . . . there are always plenty of reasons, aren't there?"

All of a sudden, as though expressing a long-standing feeling, Marcello said, with gravity and conviction, "I don't want to stay here any longer."

"What d'you want to do then?" cried the woman, getting more and more jovial. "Why, you're a young boy, you can't go leaving your home . . . You must wait till you're grownup."

"I'd much rather," said Marcello, "they'd send me to a boarding school."

The woman looked at him with tender affection and said, "You're right . . . anyhow at a boarding school there'd be someone to look after you . . D'you know why they were shouting so, last night?"

"No, why was it?"

"Wait a minute, I'll show you." She moved eagerly to the door and disappeared. Marcello heard her rushing downstairs and wondered again what could have been happening the night before. A moment later he heard the cook coming upstairs again, then she came into the room with an air of cheerful mystery. She was holding in her hand something that Marcello immediately recognized—a large photograph in a silver frame that usually stood on the piano in the drawing room. It was an old photograph, taken when Marcello was little more than two years old. It showed Marcello's mother, dressed in white with her little boy, also in a little white dress, in her arms. There was a white ribbon in his long hair. "You see this photograph?" cried the cook gaily. "Your Mummy, yesterday evening, when she came back from the theatre, went into the drawing room, and the first thing she saw, on the piano, was this photograph . . . Poor thing, she almost fainted . . . Now just have a look and see what your Dad's done to this photograph."

Marcello, surprised, looked at the photograph. Someone, using the point of a penknife or a bodkin, had pierced the eyes both of the mother and of the little boy, and then, with a red pencil, had made a number of little marks underneath the eyes of both of them, as though to indicate tears of blood gushing from the four holes. The thing was so strange and unexpected and at the same time so mysteriously gruesome that for a moment Marcello did not know what to think. "It was your Dad who did that," cried the cook, "and your Mummy did quite right to shout at him."

"But why did he do it?"

"It's witchcraft. D'you know what witchcraft is?"

"No."

"When you wish evil to somebody, you do what your Daddy's done . . . Sometimes instead of making a hole through the eyes you do it through the chest . . . through the heart . . . and soon something happens."

"What happens?"

"The person dies . . . or some misfortune happens to him . . . it depends . . . ."

"But," stammered Marcello, "I haven't done Daddy any harm."

"And your Mummy, what harm's *she* done him?" cried the cook indignantly. "But you know what's wrong with your Dad? He's crazy . . . And you know where he'll end up? At Sant' Onofrio, in the asylum . . . And now come along and get dressed; it's time you started for school . . . I'll go and put back this photograph." She ran off gaily, and Marcello was left alone.

Thinking hard, but unable to find any explanation for the incident of the photograph, he went on dressing. He had never had any special feeling for his father, and the latter's hostility, whether real or not, did not pain him; but the cook's words about the harmful powers of witchcraft gave him food for thought. Not that he was superstitious or really believed that you could do harm to someone simply by piercing the eyes of that person's photograph, but this crazy act on his father's part reawakened in him an apprehension he had deceived himself into thinking he had allayed once and for all. It was the frightening, helpless feeling of being caught in a circle of grim fatality that had obsessed him all summer and now, evoked by some malign sympathy, sprang up again in his mind, more powerful than ever, be-

fore this photograph with its stain of blood-red tears.

What was misfortune, he said to himself, what was it but a faraway speck of black in the blue of even the serenest sky, a speck that suddenly grows larger, turns into a huge, pitiless bird and dives upon its unfortunate prey like a vulture upon a carcass? Or a trap of which you have been forewarned, which you can clearly see, but into which, nevertheless, you cannot help putting your foot? Or just a curse of clumsiness, of imprudence, of blindness that creeps into your movements, your senses, your blood? This last definition seemed to him the most fitting, as the one that reduced misfortune to a want of grace and a want of grace to an intimate, obscure, inborn, inscrutable fatality—a fatality to which his attention had been again recalled by his father's act, that stood like a signboard at the opening of a sinister road. He knew this fatality implied that he would kill somebody; but what frightened him most was not so much murder as the knowledge that he was predestined to murder, no matter what he did. He was terrified, in effect, by the idea that the very consciousness of such a fatality was simply one more force that impelled him to submit to it—as though instead of consciousness there had been ignorance, but ignorance of a special kind that no one could have considered ignorance, least of all himself.

But later, at school, his childish fickleness caused him suddenly to forget these presentiments. He had one of his tormentors for a desk-neighbor, a boy called Turchi, the oldest and at the same time the most ignorant boy in the class. He was the only one who, because he had had some boxing lessons, knew how to use his fists according to the rules: with his hard, angular face and close-cropped hair, his snub nose and thin lips, and the heavy, athletic-looking scarf wound round his neck, he already gave the impression

of a professional pugilist. Turchi understood nothing of Latin; but when in the midst of a group of boys in the street outside the school, he put up a bony hand to take a minute cigarette-stump from his mouth and, furrowing the many wrinkles in his low forehead with a look of self-sufficient authority, declared, "*I* think Colucci's going to win the championship," all the boys were struck dumb, filled with respect for him. Turchi, if required, could demonstrate, by taking hold of his nose between two fingers and pulling it to one side, that his nasal septum was broken just like a real boxer's; and it was not only boxing that he engaged in, but football and any other popular, violent form of sport. Toward Marcello, Turchi maintained a sarcastic attitude. almost solemn in its brutality. It had been he who, two days before, had held Marcello's arms while the other four slipped the petticoat over his head; and Marcello, remembering this, believed that this morning he had at last found a means of winning the other boy's scornful, arrogant respect.

Taking advantage of a moment when the geography teacher had turned his back to point with his long stick at the map of Europe, Marcello wrote hastily on a copybook, "Today I'm getting a real revolver," and then pushed the copybook towards Turchi. Turchi, in spite of his ignorance, was, in his conduct, a model pupil. Always attentive, quiet, almost somber in his heavy, expressionless gravity, his inability to answer whenever he was asked even the simplest question astonished Marcello profoundly, and the latter often wondered what on earth he thought about during lessons, and why, if he was not doing his work, he pretended to be so industrious. So now, when Turchi saw the copybook, he made an impatient gesture, as much as to say, "Leave me alone—can't you see I'm listening?" But Marcello persisted, giving him a shove with his elbow, and then Turchi, without moving his

head, lowered his eyes and read the writing. Marcello saw him take a pencil and write, "I don't believe it." Stung to the quick, Marcello hastened to confirm his former message by writing, "Word of honor." Turchi, mistrustful, retorted, "What make is it?" This question disconcerted Marcello; but after a moment's hesitation, he answered, "A Wilson." He was confusing the name with Weston, a name which he had in fact heard from Turchi himself, some time before. Turchi immediately wrote, "Never heard of it." Marcello concluded with, "I'll bring it to school tomorrow," and then the dialogue came suddenly to an end, for the teacher turned round and called on Turchi to tell him which was the biggest river in Germany. As usual Turchi rose to his feet and, after long consideration, confessed, without embarrassment and with a kind of sporting sincerity, that he did not know. At that moment the door opened and the janitor put his head in to announce the end of lesson time.

At all costs, Marcello thought as he hurried through the streets toward the avenue with the plane trees, at all costs he must make Lino keep his promise and give him the revolver. Marcello was aware that Lino would give him the weapon only if he wanted to, and as he walked he wondered what was the best line for him to take in order to be certain of attaining his object. Although he had not divined the real reason of Lino's odd behavior, he guessed, with an instinctive, almost feminine coquetry, that the quickest way for him to get possession of the revolver was the one suggested on Saturday by Lino himself—to take no notice of Lino, to scorn his offers, to deny his requests, in short, to make himself as valuable as possible; and finally to refuse to get into the car unless he was quite sure that the revolver was his. Why Lino set so much store by him, and why he himself should be in a position to carry on this kind of blackmail, Marcello could

not have explained. The same instinct that suggested to him that he could blackmail Lino gave him a hint of the presence, in the background of his relations with the chauffeur, of an unusual type of affection, of a quality as embarrassing as it was mysterious. But the revolver was the central point of all his thoughts. Besides, he could not have asserted honestly that this affection and the almost feminine role he had to perform were really disagreeable to him. The only thing he wanted to avoid, he thought as he came out, hot from running, into the avenue with the plane trees, was Lino's putting his arm around his waist, as he had done in the corridor at the villa the first time they had met.

As on Saturday, the weather was stormy and cloudy, with a mild wind that seemed richly laden with spoils snatched up all along its turbulent course—dead leaves, pieces of paper, feathers, bits of fluff, straws and dust. In the avenue, the wind attacked a pile of dry leaves, lifting numbers of them high up among the bare branches of the plane trees. His attention was distracted by watching them fluttering in the air against the gloomy background of the sky, like myriads of yellow hands with fingers opened wide; and then, lowering his eyes, he saw, through all these hands of gold whirling in the wind, the long, black, shining shape of the car standing beside the pavement. His heart started beating faster, he did not know why. Faithful to his plan, he did not hasten his step but walked on steadily toward the vehicle. He passed the window in a leisurely fashion and at once, as if at a signal, the door opened and Lino, without his cap, poked his head out and said, "Marcello, won't you get in?"

He could not help being surprised at this perfectly serious invitation, after the solemn oaths of their first meeting. So Lino knew himself well, Marcello reflected, and it was positively comic to see him do a thing that he himself had fore-

seen he would do in spite of every desire to the contrary. He walked on as though he had not heard, and noticed, with an obscure satisfaction, that the car had moved and was following him. The pavement was very wide and it was deserted as far as the eye could reach, between the line of regular, many-windowed buildings and the big, slanting trunks of the plane-trees.

The car followed him at a walking pace, with a subdued humming sound caressing to the ear. After about twenty yards it passed him and stopped a short distance ahead; then the door opened again. He walked on without turning and again heard that melting voice imploring him. "Marcello, jump in . . . please do . . . forget what I said yesterday . . . Marcello, d'you hear me?" Marcello could not help saying to himself that the voice was rather repugnant—why should he moan in that way? It was lucky there was no one going along the street or he would have been ashamed. Nevertheless, he did not want to discourage the man altogether, and as he went on past the car he half turned and looked back, as though inviting him to persevere. He found himself throwing him a glance almost of encouragement, and was suddenly and unmistakably aware of the same feeling of not unpleasant humiliation, of playing a part not entirely unnatural to him, that he had felt for a moment when the boys had fastened the petticoat round his waist. It was as though fundamentally he did not dislike acting the part of the coy, disdainful woman—was, in fact, led on by nature to do so.

Meanwhile the car had started again behind him. Marcello wondered whether the moment had come to yield, and decided, on reflection, that it had not yet arrived. The car passed close to him, not stopping but merely slowing down. He heard the man's voice calling to him, "Marcello . . . ." and immediately afterward, the sudden hum of the engine as

the car moved forward. He was afraid that Lino had lost patience and was going away; he was assailed by a great fear of having to show himself at school next day empty-handed; and he started running, crying out, "Lino . . . Lino . . . stop, Lino." But the wind carried his words away, scattering them in the air with the dead leaves in a cheerless, noisy squall; the car was growing smaller and smaller in the distance—evidently Lino had not heard and was going away—and he would not get the revolver, and Turchi would start tormenting him again. Then he sighed with relief and walked on at a more or less normal pace. The car had gone on ahead not to avoid him but to wait for him at a crossing; and it had now stopped, blocking the whole width of the pavement.

He felt a kind of annoyance at Lino for having given him this humiliating moment of suspense, and he made an inward decision, in a sudden access of cruelty, to make him pay for it by carefully calculated harshness. Meanwhile, without hurrying, he had reached the crossing. The car was standing there, long, black, all its old brass fittings and antiquated coachwork glistening. Marcello started off as though he were going to walk round it: immediately the door opened and Lino looked out.

"Marcello," he said in a decided but despairing voice. "Forget what I said to you on Saturday . . . You've done your duty now . . . Come on, get in, Marcello."

Marcello had stopped beside the hood of the car. He turned and came back a step and said coldly, without looking at the man, "No, I'm not coming . . . but not because you told me on Saturday not to come . . . just because I don't want to."

"Why don't you want to?"

"Why should I? . . . Why should I get into the car?"

"To please me. . ."

"But I don't want to please you."

"Why? You don't like me?"

"No," said Marcello, lowering his eyes and playing with the handle of the door. He was aware that he had put on a vexed, obstinate, hostile expression, and no longer knew whether he did this as part of the game or in earnest. It was certainly a game that he was playing with Lino, but if it was only a game, why did he have such strong and complicated feelings about it—a mixture of vanity and repugnance, of humiliation and cruelty and contempt? He heard Lino laugh softly and affectionately and ask him, "Why don't you like me?"

This time he raised his eyes and looked him in the face. It was true, Lino was unattractive, he thought; but he had never asked himself why. He looked at his face, almost ascetic in its thin severity, and then he understood why he was not attracted to Lino: it was a double face, a face in which dishonesty had found, positively, a physical expression. It seemed to him as he looked at it that he could detect this dishonesty especially in the mouth—a mouth that at first sight was subtle, thin, contemptuous, chaste, but which, when the lips were parted and turned back in a smile, showed an expanse of glowing mucous membrane that glistened with the water of appetite. He hesitated, looking at Lino who was waiting for his answer with a smile, and then said with sincerity, "I don't like you because you've got a wet mouth."

Lino's smile vanished and his face darkened. "What nonsense are you inventing now?" he said. And then, quickly recovering himself, he added with easy facetiousness: "Well then, does Mister Marcello wish to get into his motorcar?"

"I'll get in," said Marcello, making up his mind at last, "only on one condition."

"And what's that?"

"That you'll really give me the revolver."

"Yes, that's understood . . . Now come on, get in."

"No, you've got to give it to me now, at once," Marcello obstinately insisted.

"But I haven't got it here, Marcello," said the man with sincerity, "it was left in my room on Saturday . . . We'll go to the house now and fetch it."

"Then I'm not coming," Marcello decided in a way that he himself had not expected. "Good-bye."

He moved a step forward as if to go away; and this time Lino lost patience. "Come along, don't behave like a child," he exclaimed. Leaning out, he took hold of Marcello by the arm and pulled him into the seat beside him. "Now we'll go straight to the house," he added, "and I promise you, you shall have the revolver." Marcello, secretly delighted to have been compelled to get into the car, made no protest; all he did was to pout childishly. Lino closed the door with alacrity and started the engine; the car moved off.

For a long time they did not speak. Lino did not appear talkative—perhaps, thought Marcello, because he was too pleased to talk; and as for Marcello, he had nothing to say. Now Lino would give him the revolver and then he would go home and next day he would take the revolver to school with him and show it to Turchi. Beyond these simple and pleasing anticipations his mind did not travel. His only fear was that Lino might try in some way to defraud him. In that case, he thought, he would invent some other trick to drive Lino to desperation and force him to keep his promise.

Sitting still, with his package of books on his knee, he watched the great plane trees and the buildings slipping past, until they reached the far end of the avenue. As the car

started up the hill, Lino, as though he had been thinking about it for a long time, asked, "Who taught you to be so coquettish, Marcello?"

Marcello, not quite certain of the meaning of the word, hesitated before answering. Lino seemed to become aware of his innocent ignorance, and added, "I mean so clever."

"Why?" asked Marcello.

"Well, never mind."

"It's you who are the clever one," said Marcello; "you promise me the revolver and never give it to me."

Lino laughed and put out his hand and patted Marcello's bare knee. "Yes," he said, "today I'm the clever one." Marcello, embarrassed, moved his knee; but Lino, still keeping his hand on it, added in an exultant tone, "You know, Marcello, I'm so pleased you came today . . . When I think that the other day I was begging you not to take any notice of me and not to come, I realize what a fool one can be sometimes . . . yes, an absolute fool . . . But luckily you had more sense than I did, Marcello."

Marcello said nothing. He did not altogether understand what Lino was saying to him, and besides, the hand resting on his knee irritated him. He tried more than once to move his knee away but the hand still remained. Fortunately, at a bend in the road, there was a car coming in the opposite direction. Marcello pretended to be frightened, and exclaimed, "Look out, that car's coming straight at us!"—and this time Lino withdrew his hand to turn the steering-wheel. Marcello breathed again.

They reached the country road with its high walls and hedges, then the archway with its green-painted iron gate, and finally the drive, with its rows of small, scraggy cypresses on each side and the light gleaming on the glass of the veranda at the far end. Marcello noticed that the wind was torment-

ing the cypresses just as it had the last time, under a dark and stormy sky. The car stopped, Lino jumped out and gave a hand to Marcello, and then they went off together toward the door. Today Lino did not go on ahead but held him tightly by the arm, as though he feared he would try to escape. Marcello wanted to tell him to slacken his grip, but there was no time. Lino seemed almost to be holding him suspended in the air, as if they were flying; and in this way he hurried him through the hall and pushed him into the passage. There, quite unexpectedly, he seized him roughly by the neck, saying, "How stupid you are . . . how stupid . . . why didn't you want to come?"

His voice was no longer jovial, but hoarse and broken, though with a mechanical sort of tenderness in it. Marcello, surprised, was on the point of raising his eyes to look into Lino's face, but at that moment he received a violent shove from behind. Just as one might thrust away a cat or a dog after seizing it by the back of the neck, so Lino had hurled him into his room. Then Marcello saw him turn the key in the lock, put it in his pocket and turn toward him with an expression of mingled joy and raging triumph. Lino cried in a loud voice, "That's enough now . . . now you've got to do what *I* want . . . that's enough, Marcello, you tyrant, you little beast, that's enough . . . come along, do as you're told and not another word."

These commanding, contemptuous, arrogant expressions were uttered with savage delight, with an almost sensual enjoyment; and Marcello, bewildered as he was, could not but notice that they were words without sense, more like fragments of some triumphal chant than expressions of conscious thought and will. Frightened and astonished, he watched Lino as he strode up and down the room, pulling his cap from his head and flinging it on the window sill, snatching a

shirt that was hanging over a chair, rolling it up in a ball and then shutting it up in a drawer, smoothing the crumpled bedspread, performing all sorts of practical acts with a frenzy full of obscure significance. Then, still shouting out incoherent phrases of an insolent, peremptory nature, he went over to the wall at the head of the bed, tore down the crucifix and threw it with pretentious brutality into the cupboard drawer; and Marcello realized that by this gesture Lino intended in some way or other to make it clear that he had swept aside his last scruples. As though to confirm Marcello's fear of this, Lino took the coveted revolver from the drawer of the bedside table and showed it to him, shouting, "You see it? . . . Well, you're not going to have it—never . . . You've got to do what I want without any presents, without any revolvers . . . either for love or by force."

So it was true, thought Marcello; Lino intended to cheat him, just as he had feared. He felt himself turn white in the face with anger; and he said, "Give me the revolver or I'll go away."

"No, no, there isn't a chance of it . . . either for love or by force." Lino was now brandishing the revolver in one hand; and with the other he seized Marcello by the arm and hurled him on to the bed. Marcello fell in a sitting position, but with such violence that he banged his head against the wall. At once, Lino, passing suddenly from violence to gentleness and from command to entreaty, knelt down in front of him. He put one arm round his legs and laid his other hand, still grasping the weapon, on the bedspread. He groaned and called upon Marcello by name; then, still groaning, flung both arms round his knees. The revolver now lay loose on the bed, black against the white coverlet. Marcello looked at Lino as he knelt there, his suppliant, tear-stained face, burning with desire, now raised toward him and now lowered again and

rubbed, like the muzzle of some devoted dog, against his legs. Then he grasped the revolver and, with a violent thrust, rose to his feet. Immediately Lino, thinking possibly that the boy meant to return his embrace, opened his arms and let him go. Marcello took a step into the middle of the room and then turned round.

Later, thinking over what had happened, Marcello could not help recalling that the mere touch of the cold butt of the weapon had aroused in his mind a temptation of the most ruthless and bloodthirsty kind; but at that moment all he was aware of was a violent pain in his head where he had knocked it against the wall, and an acute sense of irritation and repugnance toward Lino. The latter had remained on his knees besides the bed; but when he saw Marcello take a step backward and point the revolver at him, he turned slightly but without getting up, and throwing out his arms with a theatrical gesture, he cried dramatically, "Shoot, Marcello . . . kill me . . . yes, kill me like a dog."

It seemed to Marcello that he had never hated him so much as at that moment, for that repulsive mixture of sensuality and austerity, of repentance and lust; and in a manner that was both terrified and deliberate—just as though he felt he had to comply with the man's request—he pressed the trigger.

The shot resounded with sudden violence in the little room; and he saw Lino fall and then raise himself again with his back towards him, clutching at the side of the bed with both hands. He pulled himself up very slowly, fell sideways onto the bed and lay still. Marcello went over to him, put down the revolver at the head of the bed, called in a low voice, "Lino," and, without waiting for an answer, went to the door. But it was locked, and he remembered that Lino had taken the key out and put it in his pocket. He hesitated, disliking intensely the idea of fumbling in the dead man's pockets; then, his eyes

falling on the window, he remembered that the room was on the ground floor. Sitting astride the window sill, he turned his head hastily, casting a long, frightened, cautious look at the open space in front of the house and the car standing outside the door: he knew that if anyone happened to pass at that moment, they could not fail to see him sitting there in the window; yet there was nothing else to be done. But there was no one, and beyond the scattered trees round the house even the bare, hilly countryside appeared to be deserted as far as the eye could reach. He climbed down from the window, took his package of books from the seat of the car and walked off in a leisurely fashion toward the gate. As he walked there was reflected in his consciousness, as in a mirror, the picture of himself, a boy in shorts with some books under his arm, walking down the cypress-bordered drive, an incomprehensible figure full of gloomy foreboding.

PART ONE

CHAPTER FOUR

HOLDING his hat in one hand, Marcello took his dark glasses off his nose with the other and put them away in his jacket pocket. He entered the hall of the library and asked the attendant where he could find the files of newspapers. Then, without hurrying, he went up the broad staircase where a big window on the landing at the top blazed with the strong light of May. He felt light and almost empty, with a sense of perfect physical well-being, of intact youthful vigor. The new gray, plain-cut suit he was wearing added to this feeling another that was no less pleasant, that of a serious, precise elegance that accorded with his own tastes.

On the first floor, after filling in a slip at the entrance, he made his way to the reading room, to a desk behind which were an elderly attendant and a girl. He waited his turn and then handed in his slip, requesting the complete 1920 issues of the chief local newspaper. He waited patiently, leaning against the desk and looking at the reading room in front of him. Rows of writing tables, each with a green-shaded lamp, stretched away to the far end of the room. Marcello looked carefully at these writing tables scantily populated for the most part by students, and mentally selected his own—the last

one at the back of the room on the right. The girl reappeared, her two outstretched arms supporting the big bound volume of newspapers he had asked for. Marcello took it and went to the table he had chosen.

He put down the volume on the sloping top of the writing table and then sat down, taking care to hitch up his trousers a little. He took a cigarette from a package of a cheap brand, lit it, drew in a first mouthful of smoke, and then, calmly, holding the cigarette between two fingers, opened the volume and began turning over the pages. The headings had lost their original brightness, the blackness of the print having turned almost green, the paper was yellowed and the photographs looked faded and confused, lacking light and shade. He noticed that the bigger and more extended the heading the greater the sense of futility and absurdity it gave, announcements of events that had lost their importance and significance by the evening of the very day on which they had appeared, now, with their noisy incomprehensibility, were repugnant not only to the memory but to the imagination as well. The most absurd headings, he observed, were those that included underneath the news a comment of a more or less tendentious kind; with their mixture of graphic vivaciousness and complete absence of echo they were reminiscent of the extravagant bawlings of a madman, that deafen but do not affect the feelings. Marcello compared his feelings as he looked at these headings with the feeling he imagined he would have when he looked at the heading that concerned him, and he wondered if the notice he was looking for would arouse in him the same sense of emptiness and absurdity. This, then, was the past, he thought as he went on turning the pages, this uproar now silent, this fury spent, to which the very stuff of the journal, the yellowed paper that soon would break up and fall into dust, lent a quality of shabbiness and

vulgarity. The past was made up of violence, of error, of deceit, of frivolity, of falsehood, he thought as he read the news items on the various pages, and these were the only things that men had thought worthy of being published, day by day, and by which they recommended themselves to the memory of posterity. Life, in its normality and its profundity, was absent from these pages; yet what was he himself looking for, as he reflected thus, but the testimony of a crime?

He was in no hurry to find the item of news that concerned him, though he knew the precise date and could turn straight to it if he wished. He came now to the 22nd, the 23rd, the 24th of October 1920: he was drawing nearer with each page that he turned to what he considered the most important action of his life, but the newspaper did not prepare him in any way for the announcement, it took no account of preliminaries. Among all these pieces of news that did not touch him in any way whatever, the only one that concerned him would rise to the surface suddenly, without warning, like a fish rising from the depths of the sea to leap at the bait. He tried to make a joke of it, saying to himself, "Instead of all these grand headings about political events, they ought to have put, 'Marcello meets Lino for the first time'; 'Marcello asks for the revolver'; 'Marcello agrees to get into the car' "; but all at once the joke died in his mind and a sudden agitation took away his breath. He had reached the date he was looking for. He turned the page hastily, and there, as he had expected, was the notice, in a column with the heading: *Fatal Accident.*

Before reading it, he felt a desire for another cigarette. He inhaled a mouthful of smoke and then lowered his eyes to the newspaper. The paragraph said: "Yesterday Pasquale Seminara, chauffeur, residing at 33 Via della Camilluccia, while cleaning a revolver, accidentally fired a shot. Help came

quickly and Seminara was at once taken to the Santo Spirito Hospital, where he was found to have a wound in the chest, near the heart. The case was considered critical, and during the evening, in spite of the care lavished upon him, Seminara passed away." The notice could not have been more concise nor more conventional, he thought as he read it over again. And yet, even through the well-worn formulas of this most anonymous type of journalism, two important facts were revealed. The first was that Lino was really dead—of which he had always been convinced but which he had never had the courage to ascertain; the second was that his death had been attributed—obviously on the dying man's own evidence —to an accident. So that Marcello himself was completely secure from any possible consequence. Lino was dead, and that death could never be laid at his door.

But it was not in order to reassure himself that he had at last decided to hunt out in the library the notice of what had occurred so many years before. His anxiety, which had never been entirely lulled during those years, had never considered the material consequences of his act. It was, on the contrary, in order to see what sort of feeling the confirmation of Lino's death would arouse in him that he had that morning crossed the library threshold. From this feeling he would judge whether he was still the boy he had once been, obsessed by his own fatal abnormality, or the new, completely normal man that he had since intended to be and that he was convinced he was.

He felt a singular relief and, perhaps more than relief, astonishment, when he realized that the printed news on the yellow paper of seventeen years before aroused no appreciable echo in his mind. His reaction, he felt, was like that of a man who, having had a bandage over a deep wound for a very long time, makes up his mind at last to take it off and dis-

covers, to his surprise, that the skin where he expected to find at least a scar, is clear and smooth without a mark of any kind. Looking for the paragraph in the paper had been like removing the bandage; and to find himself unaffected by it was to find himself cured. How this cure had been accomplished, he could not have said. But there could be no doubt that it was not merely time that had produced this result. Much was owing to himself too, to his own conscious will, during all those years, to escape from abnormality and make himself like other men.

Nevertheless a kind of conscientious scruple made him take his eyes from the newspaper and gaze into space, with a feeling that he wished to visualize Lino's death clearly—a thing that until now he had always instinctively avoided doing. The paragraph in the paper was written in the conventional language of journalism, and this in itself might be a further inducement to indifference and apathy, but his own evocation of the occurrence could not fail to be vivid and moving and therefore well fitted to reawaken those ancient terrors in his mind, if they still existed. And so, following obediently in the wake of memory, which, like a pitiless, impartial guide conducted him back through time, he retrod his own childish path—his first meeting with Lino on the avenue; his longing to possess a revolver; Lino's promise; the visit to the villa; the second meeting with Lino; the man's pederastic advances; himself pointing the revolver; the man shouting theatrically, arms outstretched as he knelt beside the bed, "Kill me, Marcello . . . kill me like a dog"; himself, as if in obedience, pressing the trigger; the man falling against the bed, pulling himself up, lying there motionless on his side. He was very soon aware, as he examined all these details piece by piece, that his lack of feeling in the face of the notice in the newspaper was now being confirmed and amplified. Indeed, not merely

did he feel no remorse, but the quiet surface of his conscience was unruffled even by feelings of pity, of bitterness or of repugnance for Lino—feelings that long seemed to him inseparable from his memory of that time.

He felt nothing, in fact. An impotent man lying beside the naked, desirable body of a woman could not have been more inert than was his mind as it contemplated that remote occurrence of his youth. He was pleased at this indifference as a sure sign that there was now no connection whatever, not even of a hidden, indirect, or dormant kind between the boy that he had been and the young man that he now was. He was really and truly a different person, he went on thinking as he gently closed the big volume and rose from the table, and although his memory was able in a mechanical way to recall what had happened in that far-off October, actually his whole being, even to its most secret fibers, had now forgotten it.

Without hurrying, he went over to the desk and gave the volume to the librarian. Then, with the same air of measured but energetic composure that was his favorite attitude toward the world, he left the reading room and went down the staircase into the main hall. It was true, he could not help thinking as he came out into the strong light of the street, it was true that the printed notice of Lino's death and then his own evocation of it had awakened no echo at all in his mind; and yet he no longer felt so deeply relieved as, at the first moment, he had thought. He recalled his sensation as he had turned the pages of the old newspaper—like taking the bandages from a wound and finding it completely healed; and he said to himself that perhaps under the smooth skin the old poison was still lurking in the form of a closed, invisible abscess. He was confirmed in this suspicion not only by the transient quality of the relief he had felt when first he had discovered

that Lino's death was a matter of indifference to him, but also by the faint, depressing sense of melancholy, hanging like a transparent mourning veil between him and reality. It was as if the memory of the Lino incident, even though dissolved by the potent acids of time, had yet cast an inexplicable shadow over all his thoughts and feelings.

As he walked slowly through the crowded, sun-filled streets he tried to establish a comparison between himself as he had been seventeen years before and as he was now. He remembered that at thirteen he had been a timid boy, rather feminine, impressionable, unmethodical, imaginative, impetuous, passionate. Now, at thirty, he was not in the least timid but perfectly sure of himself, entirely masculine in his tastes and in his general attitude, calm, methodical to a fault, almost completely lacking in imagination, cool and self-controlled. It seemed to him he could remember having had, at that time, a certain tumultuous, indefinable richness of character. Now his whole character was well-defined though perhaps a little barren, and the poverty and rigidity of a few ideas and convictions had taken the place of that former generous, confused fecundity. Lastly, he had been confiding, expansive, sometimes positively exuberant. Now he was reserved, always equable in temper, lacking in vivacity if not actually gloomy, silent. The most distinctive feature, however, of the radical change that had come about in those seventeen years was the disappearance of a kind of excess of vitality resulting from a ferment of unusual and perhaps even abnormal instincts; its place seemed to have been taken by a sort of benumbed, gray normality.

It had been merely chance, he went on to think, that had prevented his submitting to Lino's desires; and certainly his demeanor toward the chauffeur, full as it was of coquettishness and of feminine tyranny, had been actuated not merely

by childish venality but also by a confused, unconscious inclination of the senses. But now he was really and truly a man just like any other man. He stopped in front of a mirror in a shop window and looked at himself for some time, examining himself with an objective detachment in which there was no complacency. Yes, he was a man just like any other man, with his gray suit, his sober tie, his tall, well-proportioned figure, his round, brown face, his well-brushed hair, his dark glasses. He remembered how, at the university, he had discovered with a kind of delight that there were at least a thousand young men of his age who dressed, spoke, thought and behaved like him. Now, probably, that number could be multiplied by a million. He was a normal man, he thought with a sharp, disdainful satisfaction, there could be no doubt about it, although he could not say how it had come about.

He remembered suddenly that he had finished his cigarettes and went into a tobacco shop in the Piazza Colonna arcade. He went up to the counter and asked for his favorite brand. At that same moment three other people were asking for the same kind and the tobacconist quickly put down on the marble-topped counter, in front of the four outstretched hands holding money, four identical packs which the four hands removed with the same identical gesture. Marcello observed that he took his pack, felt it to see that it was soft enough, and then tore open the paper in the same way as the other three. He observed also that two of the three put the pack of cigarettes, just as he did, into a small inside pocket of their jackets. Lastly, one of the three, as soon as he got outside the shop, stopped to light a cigarette with a silver lighter exactly like Marcello's. These details gave him an almost voluptuous satisfaction. Yes, he was just like other people, just like everyone else. Just like those who were buying

cigarettes of the same brand and with the same movements as he, and just like those who, when a woman in red walked past, turned—and he with them—to eye the quivering solid buttocks beneath the thin stuff of her dress. Except that sometimes, as in this last case, his resemblance to other men was deliberate and imitative rather than a result of a conformity of inclinations.

A short, misshapen newsboy came toward him with a bundle of papers over his arm, waving one of them and shouting at the top of his voice, his face purple with the effort, some incomprehensible phrase in which the only recognizable words were "Victory" and "Spain." Marcello bought a paper and carefully read the heading stretched across the top of the page; in the war in Spain the supporters of Franco had won another victory. He was conscious of reading this piece of news with undeniable pleasure, and he felt this was another sign of his complete and absolute normality. He had watched the birth of the war from the first hypocritical heading: "What is Happening in Spain?"; and then the war had spread and become of immense importance, had turned into a contest not merely of arms but of ideas; and gradually he had noticed that he was participating in it with a curious feeling that was entirely detached from any political or moral consideration (although such considerations often came up in his mind), a feeling very like that of a sports enthusiast who takes the side of one football team against another.

From the very beginning he had wanted Franco to win—not with any feeling of bitterness but with a profound, tenacious desire, as though such a victory would provide confirmation of the goodness and rightness of his own tastes and ideas not merely in the political field but in all others as well. It was, perhaps, from a love of symmetry that he had desired, and still desired, Franco's victory—like someone furnishing

his house who is anxious to collect in it furniture that is all of the same style. For he seemed to read this symmetry in the events of the last few years, with a steady increase in its clarity and importance: first the advent of fascism in Italy, then in Germany, then the war in Ethiopia, and then the war in Spain. This progress pleased him for some reason—possibly because it was easy to recognize in it a more than human logic, and the ability to recognize this gave one a sense of security and infallibility. Furthermore, he thought, folding the newspaper and putting it in his pocket, it could not be said that he had become convinced of the rightness of Franco's cause for reasons of politics or propaganda. This conviction had come to him from nowhere, as it may be supposed to come to ignorant, ordinary people—out of the air, in fact, just as one says an idea is "in the air." He took Franco's side just like innumerable other perfectly ordinary people who knew little or nothing about Spain, who scarcely glanced at the headlines of the newspaper, who were not cultivated.

It was, in fact, out of sympathy—using that word in an entirely unthinking, nonlogical, irrational sense. A sympathy that could be said only metaphorically to come out of the air; for in the air there may be pollen, smoke from houses, dust, light, but not ideas. This sympathy therefore must come from deeper layers of consciousness, and it provided yet another proof that his normality was neither superficial nor botched up in a deliberately arbitrary fashion, with arguments and motives that were mere matters of opinion. It was closely bound up with an instinctive, almost physiological condition, with a faith which he shared with millions of other persons. Here was one single, complete thing he had in common with the society and the people among whom he found himself living. He was not a solitary, an abnormal person, a madman, he was one of them, a brother, a fellow-citizen, a comrade; and this,

after his great fear that the killing of Lino might separate him from the rest of humanity, was in the highest degree comforting.

In any case, whether it was Franco or another, it mattered little, provided there was a bond, a bridge, a symbol of attachment and communion. But the fact that it was Franco and not another proved that his emotional participation in the Spanish war, besides being an indication of unity and companionship, was also a true and right thing. What else could truth be, if not something that was evident to all, that was believed and held incontestable by all? And so there was an unbroken chain with all its links firmly joined, from his feeling of sympathy, prior to all thought, to the consciousness that this sympathy was felt in exactly the same way by millions of other persons; from that consciousness to the conviction of being in the right; from the conviction of being in the right, to action. For, he thought, the possession of the truth did not merely permit, it also imposed, action. Action was a confirmation of one's own normality that must be provided both for oneself and for others; for it was not normality at all unless it was deepened and reinforced and demonstrated continually.

By this time he had arrived. The big, open archway of the Ministry was on the other side of the street, beyond a double row of moving cars and buses. He waited a moment and then slipped in behind a large black car that was making for the same archway. He followed the car in, gave the commissionaire the name of the official he wanted to speak to, and then sat down in the waiting room, almost pleased to be waiting there like other people, among other people. He had no feeling of haste or impatience, nor of intolerance for the routine and etiquette of the Ministry. On the contrary this routine, this etiquette pleased him, as symbols of a yet vaster

and more general routine and etiquette, and he adapted himself willingly to them. He felt perfectly calm and cool, even if—and this was nothing new to him—a little sad. It was a sadness of a mysterious kind he had come to consider, by now, as inseparable from his character. He had always been sad in this way, lacking in gaiety, like some lake in whose waters is reflected a very high mountain that shuts out the sunlight from it and makes it black and melancholy. One knows that if the mountain could be removed the sun would bring a smile to the face of the waters, but the mountain is always there and the lake is always sad. Like the lake, he too was sad, but what the mountain was, he could not have told.

The waiting room, a small room leading out of the porter's lodge, was filled with a heterogeneous mixture of people, quite the opposite of what one might have expected to find in the antichamber of a Ministry so famous for the elegance and social distinction of its officials. Three individuals of debauched and sinister appearance—informers, perhaps, or plain-clothes policemen—were smoking and chattering together in low voices next to a young woman with black hair and a white and red face, who was gaudily painted and dressed and was to all appearances a prostitute of the lowest kind. Next was an old man, cleanly though poorly dressed in black, with a white mustache and beard, possibly a schoolteacher. Finally, next to Marcello himself, a small, thin, gray-haired woman with a troubled, anxious expression, who looked like a housewife and mother.

He observed all these people stealthily, with a strong feeling of repugnance. This was what always happened to him. He thought he was normal and just like everyone else when he pictured the crowd to himself as an abstract whole, as a great, existing army held together by common feelings, common ideals, common aims, an army of which it was comfort-

ing to form a part. But as soon as individuals rose to the surface of this crowd, his illusion of normality broke to pieces against their diversity, since he failed completely to recognize himself in them and felt at the same time both repugnance and detachment. What was there in common between him and those three sinister, vulgar men, between him and that woman of the streets, between him and that white-haired old man, between him and that humble, worn-out mother? Nothing at all, except for the repulsion, the pity, that he felt. "Clerici," called the voice of the commissionaire. He started and rose to his feet. "First staircase on the right." Without turning, he went off in the direction he had been shown.

He walked up a very wide staircase with a narrow red carpet in the middle and found himself, after the second flight of stairs, on a vast landing with three large double doors opening from it. He went to the door in the middle, opened it and came into a big, half-dark room. In it was a long, massive table, and on the table, in the middle, a globe. Marcello walked about this room for a few moments (evidently, judging by the half-closed shutters and the covers over the settees along the walls, it was not in use), then opened one of the many doors and came out into a dark, narrow passage with glass-fronted bookshelves on each side. At the end of the passage was a partly closed door with light coming through the crack. Marcello went up to it, hesitated, and then very gently pushed the door slightly. It was not so much curiosity that urged him to this as a desire to find an attendant to show him the way to the room he was looking for. Peeping in through the crack he realized that his suspicion that he had come to the wrong place was not unfounded. In front of him was a long, narrow room into which a suave light penetrated from a single, yellow curtained window. In front of the win-

dow was a table, and sitting at the table with his back profiled against the window was a young man with a broad, massive face and a plump figure.

Standing by the table, with her back toward him, Marcello could see a woman in a light dress with a pattern of big black flowers on a white background, and a wide black hat of gauze and lace. She was very tall and very slim in the waist, but broad in the shoulders and hips, with long legs and thin calves. She was leaning over the table and talking in a low voice to the man who sat quite still listening to her, in profile, looking not at her but at his own hand playing with a pencil on the slope of the desk in front of him. Then she moved over and stood close to the armchair, opposite the man, her back against the desk and facing the window, in a more confidential attitude; but the black hat tilted over her eye prevented Marcello from seeing her face. She hesitated, then bent over sideways and with an awkward movement, bending one leg—like someone stooping down to catch the jet of a fountain in his mouth—sought the man's lips with her own, while he allowed himself to be kissed without moving or giving the slightest visible sign that the kiss was agreeable to him. She threw herself backward again, both her own and the man's face hidden by the wide sweep of her hat, and staggered and would have lost her balance had not the man put his arm round her waist and held her up. Then she stood upright, and the man sitting in the chair was concealed by her body. It looked as if she might be stroking his head. The man's arm was still round her waist; then he appeared to relax his hold and his thick, square hand, as though pulled downward by its own weight, slid onto the woman's buttock and remained there open and with fingers spread wide, like a crab or a spider on a smooth, spherical surface that provides no foothold. Marcello closed the door again.

He went back along the passage to the room where the globe stood. What he had seen confirmed the Ministry's reputation for libertinism, for the man sitting at the desk in the room was the Minister himself and Marcello had at once recognized him; but strangely enough, in spite of his inclination to make moral judgments, this did not make any impression on the background of his convictions. Marcello was not conscious of any liking for this social, woman-chasing minister, in fact he rather disliked him; and the intrusion of his love-life into his office seemed to him highly unbecoming. But none of this affected in the slightest degree his political beliefs. It was like being told, by trustworthy people, that other important personages were thieves or incompetent or used their political influence for personal ends. He registered these items of news with a rather gloomy feeling of indifference as things that did not concern him, inasmuch as he had made his choice once and for all and did not intend to alter it. He felt moreover that such things did not surprise him because he had, in a sense, discounted them from time immemorial owing to preococious knowledge of the less amiable characteristics of mankind. But he was above all conscious that, between his loyalty to the regime and the highly rigid moral standards that governed his own conduct, there could be no possible relation. The reasons for his loyalty had origins deeper than any moral criterion and could not be shaken by a hand feeling a woman's hip in a government office, or by a theft, or by any other crime or error. What those origins were, he could not have stated precisely; between them and his conscious thought stood the dull, opaque barrier of his obstinate melancholy.

Calmly, impassively, patiently he went to another of the doors, glanced through it into another corridor, drew back, tried a third door and at last found his way into the ante-

chamber he was seeking. There were people sitting on the settees round the walls, and gold-laced commissionaires stood in the doorways. In a low voice he gave one of them the name of the official he wished to see, and then went and sat down on one of the settees. To while away the time he opened the newspaper again. The news of the victory in Spain was printed right across the top, and this irritated him as an extravagance in doubtful taste. He reread the message in heavy type announcing the victory and then went on to a long despatch, but gave up reading it almost at once because he was annoyed by the mannered, would-be soldierly style of the special correspondent. He stopped a moment to ask himself how he would have written this article, and was surprised to find himself thinking that if they had depended upon him, not merely the article from Spain but all the other aspects of the regime as well, from the least important to the most showy, would have been entirely different. In reality, he thought, there was practically nothing about the regime that he did not dislike profoundly; yet that was the path he had chosen and he must stick to it. He opened the paper again and skimmed over a few other news items, carefully avoiding patriotic or propagandist articles. Then at last he raised his eyes from the paper and looked round the room.

There was no one left but one old gentleman with a round white head and a ruddy face imprinted with an expression of mingled impudence, cupidity and cunning. Dressed in light colors, with a youthful, sport jacket with a slit at the back, heavy crepe-soled shoes and a gay tie, he assumed an air of being quite at home in the Ministry, walking up and down the room and calling out questions in a self-possessed, joking, impatient way to the obsequious ushers who stood at the doors. Then one of the doors opened and out came a bald, middle-aged man, thin except for a prominent paunch, with a

drawn, yellow face, eyes buried deep in big, dark sockets, and a brisk, skeptical, witty expression on his sharp features. The old man went straight up to him with an exclamation of humorous protest, the other man greeted him in a ceremonious, deferential manner, and then the old man, with a confidential gesture, took hold of the yellow-faced man not by the arm but actually around the waist, as if he had been a woman, and as he walked beside him across the room, he began speaking in a low, urgent whisper.

Marcello had followed the scene with an indifferent eye; then all of a sudden he realized to his surprise that he felt a crazy sort of hatred for the old man, for some reason unknown to himself. Marcello was aware that at any moment and for the most diverse reasons an access of hatred of this kind might rise up to the dead surface of his accustomed apathy, unexpected as a monster emerging from a motionless sea; yet each time it happened he was astonished at coming face to face with an unknown aspect of his own character, which all its other aspects, so well-known and so secure, seemed to contradict. This old man, for instance—he felt he could kill him, or have him killed, with the greatest ease; in fact he wanted to kill him. And why? Perhaps it was because he saw skepticism, the fault he most hated, so plainly written upon that rubicund countenance. Or was it because his jacket had a slit at the back and the old man's hand in his pocket raised a flap of the material, thus revealing the hinder part of his too-limp and too-full pants and so gave the revolting impression of a dummy in a tailor shop window? Anyhow he hated him, and with an intensity so strong and so insufferable that he preferred, in the end, to lower his eyes and read the newspaper again. When he looked up again the old man and his companion had disappeared and the room was empty.

After a short time one of the ushers came and murmured to him that he could be received now, and Marcello rose and followed him. The usher opened one of the doors and showed him in. Marcello found himself in a spacious room with frescoed walls and ceiling, at the far end of which was a table covered with papers. Behind the table was sitting the yellow-faced man whom he had already seen in the other room; at the side sat another man whom Marcello knew well, his own immediate superior in the Secret Service. As Marcello came in the yellow-faced man, who was one of the Minister's secretaries, rose to his feet; the other man remained seated and greeted him with a nod. The latter, a thin old man of military appearance, with a scarlet, wooden-looking face and a pair of mustaches of an improbable, mask-like blackness and bristliness, formed a complete contrast with the secretary. He was a loyal, rigid, honest man, accustomed to carrying out orders without discussion, putting what he considered to be his duty above everything, even above conscience; whereas the secretary, from what Marcello remembered hearing, was a man of a more recent and entirely different type—ambitious, skeptical, of social tastes, with a passion for intrigue that was carried to the point of cruelty, beyond all professional obligation and all limit of conscience. Marcello's whole preference was, naturally, for the old man, for the added reason that he thought he could discern, in that red and ravaged face, the same obscure melancholy that so often oppressed himself. Perhaps like him Colonel Baudino was aware of the contrast between a rigid, almost bewitched loyalty with nothing rational about it and the too often deplorable aspects of everyday reality. But perhaps, he thought again as he looked at the old man, perhaps it was only an illusion; perhaps he himself was, out of sympathy, endowing his

superior with his own feelings in the hope of not being the only one to experience them.

The colonel, without looking either at Marcello or at the secretary, said drily, "This is Dr. Clerici about whom I spoke to you not long ago." The secretary, with a ceremonious, almost ironical promptitude, leaned across the table, held out his hand and invited him to be seated. Marcello sat down; the secretary sat down, took a box of cigarettes and offered it first to the colonel, who refused, and then to Marcello, who accepted. After he himself had also lit a cigarette, he said, "Clerici, I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance . . . The Colonel, here, never stops singing your praises . . . From all he says you seem to be an 'ace' as they call it." He underlined the words "as they call it" with a smile, and then went on: "We've gone carefully over your plan with the Minister and we judge it to be quite excellent . . . You know Quadri well?"

"Yes," said Marcello, "he was my tutor at the University."

"And you're sure Quadri knows nothing of your official position?"

"I don't think so."

"Your idea of a faked political conversion with the object of inspiring confidence and getting inside their organization and even contriving to be entrusted with a job in Italy," went on the secretary, looking down at some notes in front of him on the table, "is a good one . . . The Minister, too, agrees that something of the kind should be tried without any delay . . . When would you feel inclined to start, Clerici?"

"As soon as required."

"Excellent," said the secretary, a little surprised nevertheless, as if he had expected the answer to be different, "admirable . . . However there's one point that must be made clear . . . You're proposing to carry out a—let us say— rather

delicate, dangerous mission . . . and we were saying, with the Colonel, that in order not to be conspicuous you ought to find, to think out, to invent some plausible pretext for your presence in Paris . . . I'm not saying that they'd know who you are or would be in a position to discover . . . but, in a word, you can't be too careful—all the more so since Quadri, as you tell us in your report, was perfectly well aware at one time of your feelings of loyalty towards the regime. . . ."

"If it hadn't been for those feelings," Marcello observed drily, "there couldn't have been any conversion either . . ."

"Of course, exactly . . . But one doesn't go to Paris on purpose to call at Quadri's and say to him, 'Here I am.' No, you must give the impression of happening to be in Paris for private reasons—nonpolitical reasons— and of taking advantage of this to tell Quadri all about your spiritual crisis . . . What you must do," concluded the secretary, looking up at Marcello, "is to combine your mission with something personal, something unofficial." The secretary turned toward the colonel and added, "Don't you think so, Colonel?"

"Yes, that's my opinion," said the colonel, without raising his eyes. After a moment he went on, "But only Dr. Clerici can find the pretext that's needed."

Marcello bent his head, having no particular idea on the subject. It seemed to him that no answer could be made for the moment, since such a pretext required calm examination. He was on the point of replying, "Give me two or three days to think about it," when suddenly his tongue spoke for him almost against his will. "I'm getting married in a week's time . . . The mission could be combined with my honeymoon."

This time the secretary's surprise, though immediately covered by a prompt enthusiasm, was obvious and profound.

The colonel, on the other hand, remained entirely passive, just as though Marcello had not spoken. "Excellent . . . admirable," exclaimed the secretary, looking rather disconcerted; "you're getting married . . . no better pretext could possibly be found . . . the classic Paris honeymoon."

"Yes," said Marcello without smiling, "the classic Paris honeymoon."

The secretary was afraid that he had offended him. "What I meant was that Paris is just the right place for a honeymoon . . . Of course I'm not married . . . but if I was going to be, I think I should go to Paris too."

This time Marcello did not speak. It often happened that his answer to people he did not like took this form—a complete silence. The secretary, in order to recover himself, turned to the colonel and said, "You're quite right, colonel . . . Only Dr. Clerici could have found such a pretext . . . We, even if we'd found it, couldn't have suggested it to him."

This remark, uttered in an ambiguous, half-serious tone of voice, could be taken, thought Marcello, in two ways. It could be meant as a real if slightly ironical praise, as much as to say, "Devil take it, what fanaticism!"; or it could be the expression of a feeling of amazed contempt, "What servility! He doesn't even respect his own marriage." Probably, he thought, it was both these things, since it was clear that in the case of the secretary himself the boundary between fanaticism and servility was not very precisely marked; both of them were means that he used to achieve the same ends. He noticed with satisfaction that the colonel, too, withheld from the secretary the smile which the latter's double-edged remark seemed to be asking for. A moment's silence ensued. Marcello was now looking straight into the secretary's eyes with a fixity and a lack of timidity that he both knew and wished

to be disconcerting. The secretary did not return his look, but, leaning with both hands on the top of the table, rose to his feet.

"All right, then . . . Colonel, will you and Dr. Clerici make all necessary arrangements about the practical details of the mission? . . . And you," he went on, turning towards Marcello, "I want you to understand that you have the full support of the Minister as well as mine . . . In fact," he added, with an affectation of casualness, "the Minister has expressed the wish to make your personal acquaintance."

Once again Marcello did not open his mouth; all he did was to rise to his feet and make a slight, deferential bow. The secretary, who was perhaps expecting some words of gratitude, again made a movement of surprise that he quickly repressed. "Wait a moment, Clerici . . . He told me to take you straight to him now."

The colonel rose and said, "Clerici, you know where to find me." He held out his hand to the secretary, but the latter insisted on accompanying him to the door with ceremonious, obsequious zeal. Marcello saw them shake hands, and then the colonel vanished and the secretary came back to him.

"Come along, Clerici," he said. "The Minister is extremely busy, but in spite of that he insists on seeing you in order to show how pleased he is with you. . . It's the first time, isn't it, that you've been taken in to see the Minister?" These words were spoken as they were crossing a small antichamber adjoining the secretary's room. The latter went to a door, opened it and disappeared, making a sign to him to wait, and then, almost immediately reappeared and invited him to follow.

Marcello entered the same long, narrow room that he had looked into not long before through the crack in the door,

only now the room lay before him in breadth, with the table in front of him. Behind the table was sitting the man with the broad, massive face and plump figure that he had peeped in upon as the Minister was allowing himself to be kissed by the woman in the big black hat. Marcello noticed that the table was quite bare, polished like a mirror, with no papers on it, only a large bronze inkpot and a closed portfolio of dark-colored leather. "Excellency, this is Dr. Clerici," said the secretary.

The Minister rose and held out his hand to Marcello with a zealous cordiality even more conspicuous than that of the secretary, but entirely lacking in pleasantness, in fact decidedly commanding. "How are you, Clerici?" He pronounced his words slowly and with care, haughtily, as though they contained some special meaning. "I hear you spoken of in the highest terms. . . The regime has need of men like you." The Minister sat down again, took his handkerchief out of his pocket and blew his nose, at the same time examining certain papers that the secretary laid before him. Marcello retired discreetly toward the farthest corner of the room. The Minister looked at the papers while the secretary whispered in his ear, then he looked at his handkerchief, and Marcello saw that the white linen was stained with scarlet. He remembered that as he had come into the room the Minister's mouth had looked to him unnaturally red—with lipstick from the woman in the black hat. Still examining the papers that the secretary was showing him, displaying no embarrassment, no concern at being observed, the Minister started vigorously rubbing his mouth with his handkerchief, looking at it every now and then to see if the lipstick was still coming off. At last his examination of the papers and of the handkerchief came to a simultaneous end, and the Minister rose to his feet and again held out

his hand to Marcello. "Good-bye, Clerici," he said; "as my secretary will have already told you, the mission you are undertaking has my complete and unqualified support."

Marcello bowed, grasped the thick, square hand, and followed the secretary out of the room.

They went back to the secretary's room. The latter put down on the table the papers that had been examined by the Minister and then accompanied Marcello to the door. "Well then, Clerici, into the lion's mouth!" he said with a smile, "and best wishes for your marriage." Marcello thanked him with a nod and a bow and a murmured phrase. The secretary, with a last smile, shook his hand. Then the door closed.

CHAPTER FIVE

IT WAS late now and, as soon as he came out of the Ministry, Marcello hastened his step. He took his place in the line at the bus stop, in the midst of the hungry, irritable midday crowd, and patiently awaited his turn to get on to the already crowded vehicle. He accomplished part of his journey hanging on outside, on the step, then with a great effort managed to squeeze himself onto the platform; and there he remained, hemmed in on every side by other passengers, while the bus, jolting and roaring, climbed up the steep streets running from the center of the town to the suburbs.

These discomforts did not worry him; in fact he found them helpful to him, inasmuch as they were shared with so many others and contributed, if only in a small degree, to make him like everybody else. Besides, contacts with a crowd, however disagreeable and inconvenient, pleased him and always seemed to him preferable to contacts with individuals. From a crowd, he thought, raising himself on tiptoe to breathe more freely, from a crowd he derived the comforting feeling of many-sided fellowship, whether it was a matter of cramming oneself into a bus or of patriotic enthusiasm at political meetings; whereas from individuals he derived nothing but doubts,

both about himself and about others—which was what had happened that morning during his visit to the Ministry.

Why, for instance, why, the moment after he had offered to combine his mission with his honeymoon, had he experienced that painful feeling of having performed an act either of gratuitous servility or of clumsy fanaticism? Because, he told himself, the offer had been made to that skeptical, designing, corrupt man, that despicable, odious secretary. It was he who, by his mere presence, had inspired in him a sense of shame for an act which had in reality been profoundly spontaneous and disinterested. And now, while the bus rolled on from one stop to another, he excused himself by saying that he would not have had a sense of shame if he had not found himself face to face with a man like that, a man for whom neither loyalty nor devotion nor sacrifice existed, but only calculation, discretion, self-interest. His offer had not sprung from any mental speculation but from the obscure depths of his spirit—a sure proof, apart from anything else, of the authentic nature of his absorption into social and political normality. Another man—the secretary, for instance—would only have made such an offer after long and careful calculation; he had made it on the spur of the moment. As for the impropriety of combining his honeymoon with a political mission, it was not worth wasting time even in thinking about it. He was what he was, and all that he did was right if it was governed by what he was.

With these thoughts in his mind he got off the bus and walked along the street of this quarter where minor officials lived, on a pavement bordered with white and pink oleanders. The great doorways of massive, shabby blocks of flats occupied by government officials opened on to this pavement, and through them one could see vast, dreary courtyards.

Alternating with the doorways was a series of modest shops that Marcello knew well—the tobacconist, the baker, the grocer, the butcher, the druggist. It was midday and there were many revealing signs, even in these humble concerns, of the mild and transitory gaiety that comes with the breaking-off of work and the family gathering—smells of cooking coming from half-closed windows on the ground floor; badly dressed men hurrying into doorways, almost at a run; voices on the radio and the sound of a phonograph. From a little enclosed garden in a recess of one of the buildings an espalier of climbing roses on the railings greeted him with a wave of sharp, dusty fragrance. Marcello quickened his step and went in at the doorway marked 19, together with two or three other officials—and imitating their haste, not without satisfaction—started to walk up the stairs.

He went slowly up the broad stairs, where dreary twilight alternated with sumptuous light from big windows on the landings. But at the second floor he remembered that he had forgotten something—the flowers he never failed to bring to his fiancée each time he was invited to lunch at her home. Glad that he remembered in time, he ran down the stairs again, went out into the street and walked straight to the corner of the building, where a woman squatted on a stool with a few jars of seasonal flowers in front of her. He hurriedly selected half a dozen roses, the best the flower seller had, tall and straight-stalked, dark red in color, and, holding them to his nose to breathe their perfume, went back into the building and upstairs, this time to the top floor. Here, there was only one door on the landing, and a smaller staircase led up to a little rustic door, underneath which a brilliant light shone from an open terrace. He rang the bell, thinking, "Let's hope her mother doesn't come and

open the door to me." For his future mother-in-law displayed an almost doting love for him that embarrassed him profoundly.

A moment later the door opened and Marcello was relieved to see in the dim light of the hall the figure of the little servant girl—almost a child—bunched up in a white apron much too big for her, her pale face crowned by a double coil of black plaits. She shut the door again, but not before she had stuck her head out for a moment to peer inquisitively onto the landing; while Marcello, breathing in the strong smell of cooking that filled the air, went through into the drawing room.

The window of this room was almost closed, to keep out the heat and light, but it was still possible in the dimness to distinguish the dark, sham-Renaissance furniture that cumbered it. They were massive pieces, severe, heavily carved, and they made a curious contrast with the ornaments scattered about the room on brackets and on the small table, all of them in a coquettish but rather out-of-date taste—a little nude woman kneeling on the edge of an ash tray, a blue pottery sailor playing the accordion, a group of white and black dogs, two or three lamps shaped like buds or flowers. There were many ash trays made of metal or china which originally, Marcello knew, had contained wedding sweetmeats from friends or relations of his fiancée. The walls were hung with red, imitation damask, and bright-colored landscapes and still-life paintings in black frames were hung upon them. Marcello sat down on the sofa, already clothed in its summer covering, and looked round with satisfaction. It was a real middle-class home, he reflected once again, the home of a middle-class family of the most conventional and most modest type, similar in every way to other homes in this same building, in this same quarter, and this was for him

its most pleasing aspect—the sensation of finding himself face to face with something absolutely ordinary, almost common, and yet completely reassuring. He was aware of an almost abject feeling of complacency at the ugliness of the house. He himself had grown up in a pretty house where everything was in good taste, and he realized that everything that surrounded him at this moment was hopelessly ugly; but it was just this that he needed, this perfectly anonymous ugliness, as a further means of bringing him into line with his equals.

He remembered that for lack of money—anyhow for the first few years—the two of them, Giulia and he, would have to live in this house after they were married, and he almost blessed their poverty. By himself, following his own taste, he would never have been capable of making his home look so ugly and so ordinary. Quite soon, then, this room would be his own sitting room; just as the "art-nouveau" bedroom, in which his future mother-in-law and her late husband had slept for thirty years, would be his bedroom, and the mahogany dining room in which Giulia and her parents had eaten their meals twice a day for the whole of their lives would be his dining room. Giulia's father had been an important official in one of the ministries, and this home of his, furnished according to the taste of the period when he was young, was a kind of temple elevated in rather a touching manner in honor of the twin divinities of respectability and normality. Soon, he thought, with a joy that was almost greedy, almost lascivious yet at the same time melancholy, soon he would be absorbed rightfully into this normality and this respectability.

The door opened and Giulia came rushing in, talking to someone in the passage, perhaps the maid. When she had finished talking she closed the door and hurried over to her fiancé. Giulia, at twenty, was as handsomely developed as

a woman of thirty, with a slightly coarse, almost vulgar yet fresh and solid handsomeness that showed her youthfulness and also gave an indefinable impression of a capacity for sensual self-deception and enjoyment. She had a very white skin, large eyes of a dark and languid clearness, thick, wavy chestnut hair and full, red lips. Marcello, as he saw her coming toward him in a light, tailormade suit through which the curves of her exuberant figure seemed to be bursting, could not help thinking with renewed satisfaction that he was marrying a really normal, ordinary girl, very similar to the drawing room that had just given him such a feeling of relief. And the same feeling of relief and comfort came over him when he heard once again her drawling, good-natured voice with its local accent saying: What lovely roses! . . . But why? I've already told you you mustn't bother . . . It's not as if it was the first time you were coming to lunch with us." As she spoke, she walked across and put the roses into a blue vase that stood on a yellow marble column in a corner of the room.

"I like to bring you flowers," said Marcello.

Giulia gave a sigh of satisfaction and plumped down on the sofa beside him. Marcello looked at her and noticed that a sudden embarrassment—unmistakable sign of incipient excitement—had taken the place of the impulsive self-possession of a moment before. Then, all at once, she turned toward him and, throwing her arms round his neck, murmured, "Give me a kiss."

Marcello put his arm round her waist and kissed her on the mouth. Giulia was of a sensual nature, and in these kisses —which were almost always demanded by her from a reluctant Marcello—there came invariably a moment when this sensuality of hers crept in in an aggressive manner and altered the chaste, pre-ordained character of their relations

as an engaged couple. This time again, just when their lips were on the point of separating, she seemed to be carried away by a violent onslaught of desire, and throwing her arm suddenly round Marcello's neck, pressed her mouth once more fiercely against his. He felt her tongue work its way between his lips and then move rapidly round, twisting and turning inside his mouth. Meanwhile she had seized his hand and was holding it against her body, guiding it until it lay clasping her left breast. At the same time she was blowing through her nostrils and breathing hard, with an innocent, unsatisfied, animal sound.

Marcello was not in love with his future wife; but he liked Giulia and these sensual embraces never failed to excite him. But he did not feel inclined to reciprocate the transports; he wished his relations with his fiancée to be kept within the bounds of tradition, feeling that a greater intimacy would reintroduce into his life the disorder, the abnormality that he was all the time seeking to banish. After a moment he took his hand away from her breast and very gently pushed her away. "Oh, how cold you are!" said Giulia, withdrawing from him and looking at him with a smile. "Really there are times when I think you aren't fond of me at all."

"You know I'm fond of you," said Marcello.

She went on talking volubly. "I'm so pleased when you say that," she said. "I've never been so happy . . . By the way, d'you know, just this morning Mummy was insisting that we must have her bedroom . . . She'll go into that little room at the end of the passage . . . What d'you think about it? . . . Ought we to accept?"

"I think," said Marcello, "that she wouldn't like it if we refused."

"That's what I think too . . . Just fancy, when I was a little girl I used to dream of sleeping one day in a room

like that . . . Now I don't know whether I like it so much . . . D'you like it?" she asked, in a doubtful and at the same time complacent tone of voice, as if she were afraid of his criticism of her taste and also anxious to have it approved.

Marcello hastened to reply: "I like it very much . . . It's a lovely room!" And he saw that these words aroused a visible satisfaction in Giulia.

Delighted, she planted a kiss on his cheek and went on. "This morning I ran into Signora Persico . . . I invited her to the reception . . D'you know, she didn't know I was getting married? . . . She asked me such a lot of questions . . . When I told her who you were, she told me she knew your mother . . . She met her at the seaside some years ago."

Marcello said nothing. It was always highly disagreeable to him to talk about his mother, with whom he had not lived for years and whom he rarely saw. Giulia, unaware of his embarrassment, went on chattering and again changed the subject. "Now, about the the reception . . . We've made out a list of people to be invited . . . Would you like to see it?"

"Yes, let me see it."

She drew a sheet of paper out of her pocket and handed it to him. Marcello took it and looked at it. It was a long list of names, grouped by families—fathers, mothers, daughters, sons. Then men were indicated not only by their Christian names and surnames but by their professional designations as well—doctors, lawyers, engineers, professors; and, if they had them, by their titles too—*Commendatore, Grande Ufficiale, Cavaliere.* Beside each family Giulia, to be on the safe side, had written down the number of persons that composed it—three, five, two, four. Almost all the names were unknown to Marcello, yet he felt he had known them for a long time. They were all essentially middle-class people,

in the professions or the civil service, people who had homes exactly like this one, with drawing rooms like this and furniture like this; and they had marriageable daughters very like Giulia, whom they married off to young officials with doctor's degrees very similar, he hoped, to himself. He examined the long list, pausing at some of the most characteristic, ordinary names, with a profound satisfaction tinged with his usual cold, settled melancholy. "Now who, for instance, is Arcangeli?" he could not help asking, taking a name at random. "Commendatore Giuseppe Archangeli, with his wife Iole, his daughters Cilvana and Beatrice and his son Dr. Gino?"

"Never mind, you don't know them . . . Arcangeli was a friend of poor Daddy's at the Ministry."

"Where does he live?"

"Two steps from here, in Via Porpora."

"And what's his drawing room like?"

"You do ask the funniest questions, you know," she exclaimed with a laugh. "Why, what d'you expect it to be like? It's a room just like this one and like lots of others too . . . Why does it interest you so much to know what the Arcangeli's drawing-room is like?"

"And the daughters, are they engaged to be married?"

"Yes, Beatrice is . . . But why . . .?"

"What's her fiancé like?"

"Well really—you even want to know about him! Well, he's got an odd name, Schirinzi, and he works in a lawyer's office."

Marcello noted that no inferences of any kind as to the nature of her guests could be deduced from Giulia's answers. Probably they had no more character in her mind than they had on the piece of paper: they were simply names of respectable, indistinguishable, normal people. He ran his

eye down the list again and stopped at random at another name. "And who is Dr. Cesare Spadoni, with his wife Livia and his lawyer brother Tullio?"

"He's a children's doctor . . . His wife was at school with me. You may have met her—very attractive, dark, small, pale . . . He's a good-looking young man, clever too, and well-bred . . . The brother's good-looking too . . . They're twins."

"And Cavaliere Luigi Pace and his wife Teresa and his four sons, Maurizio, Giovanni, Vittorio and Riccardo?"

"Another of poor Daddy's friends . . . The sons are all students . . . Riccardo's still at school."

Marcello saw that it was useless to go on asking for information about the people on the list. Giulia would not be able to tell him much more than could be told from the list itself. Besides, he thought, even if she gave him minute information about the characters and the lives of these people, that information would necessarily be confined within the extremely narrow limits of her own judgment and intelligence. But he was conscious of an almost voluptuous contentment —even though its voluptuous quality had no joy in it—at being able, thanks to his marriage, to enter into and become a part of this extremely ordinary society. But there was still one question on the tip of his tongue, and after a moment's hesitation he decided to put it to her: "Now tell me—am I like these guests of yours?"

"How d'you mean—physically?"

"No . . . what I want to know is whether in your opinion I have any points of resemblance with them—in manner, in look, in general appearance . . . in fact, whether I'm like them."

"For me, you're better than anyone else," she answered impetuously. "But apart from that—yes—you *are* the same sort of person . . . You're well-bred, serious-minded, clever

. . . in fact, one can see that, like them, you're a good, honest person . . . But why d'you ask me that question?"

"Never mind."

"How strange you are," she said, looking at him with a kind of curiosity; "most people want to be different from everyone else . . . but you're just the opposite; anyone would think you wanted to be *like* everyone else."

Marcello said nothing, but handed the list back to her, remarking in an offhand manner, "Anyhow I don't know a single one of them."

"Well, d'you think I know them all?" said Giulia gaily. "With lots of them, it's only Mummy who knows even who they are . . . Besides, the reception is all over in a minute . . . just an hour or so, and then you'll never see them again."

"*I* don't mind seeing them," said Marcello.

"I was only talking," said Giulia. "Now listen to the menu the hotel's suggested and tell me if you approve." Giulia took another piece of paper from her pocket and read aloud:

Consommé froid
Filets de Sole Meunière
Dinde au riz, sauce suprème
Salade de saison
Fromages assortis
Glace diplomatique
Fruits
Café et liqueurs

"What d'you think of it?" she asked, in the same doubtful but complacent tone in which, a short time before, she had spoken of her mother's bedroom; "d'you think it's all right? D'you think they'll have enough to eat?"

"I think it's excellent, and plenty of it too," said Marcello.

Giulia went on: "About the champagne—we chose Italian champagne . . . It's not so good as French, but for drinking toasts it's perfectly all right." She was silent for a moment, and then went on in her usual voluble way, "You know what Father Lattanzi said? That if you want to get married you must receive communion and if you want to receive communion you must go to confession . . . otherwise he won't marry us."

For a moment Marcello, taken by surprise, did not know what to say. He was not a believer and it was perhaps ten years since he had been to church. Besides, he had always been convinced that he felt a decided antipathy toward all things ecclesiastical. Now he realized to his astonishment that far from being annoyed by it, this idea of confession and communion was pleasing and attractive to him, in the same way that he was pleased and attracted by the wedding reception, by all those guests that he did not know, by his marriage to Giulia, and by Giulia, herself who was so ordinary and like so many other girls. It was a further link, he thought, in the chain of normality by which he was seeking to anchor himself in the shifting sands of life; and in addition this link was made of a more noble, a more resistant, metal than the others—religion. He was almost surprised at not having thought of it before, and attributed this forgetfulness to the obvious, easy-going character of the religion in which he had been born and to which he had always seemed to belong, even without practicing it. Curious to know how Giulia would answer, he said, "But I'm not a believer."

"Who is?" she replied calmly. "D'you think ninety per cent of the people who go to church believe in it? And the priests themselves?"

"But *you* believe?"

Giulia waved her hand in the air. "Well, well," she said, "up to a point . . . Every now and then I say to Father Lattanzi, You don't bewitch *me* with all your stories, you priests . . . I believe them and I don't believe them . . . Or rather," she added punctiliously, "let's say that I have a religion all of my own . . . different from the religion of the priests."

What does she mean by a religion of her own, wondered Marcello. But knowing by experience that Giulia often spoke without knowing very well what she was saying, he did not press the point. Instead, he said, "My case is more serious . . . I don't believe at all, and I haven't any religion."

Giulia waved her hand gaily and indifferently. "But what does it mean to you? . . . You must go . . . It means so much to them, and it doesn't cost you anything."

"I daresay, but I shall be forced to tell a lie."

"Mere words . . . Besides, it'll be a lie for a good purpose . . . You know what Father Lattanzi says?—that you must do certain things just as if you believed, even if you don't believe . . . Faith comes afterwards."

Marcello was silent for a moment, and then said; "All right . . . I'll go to confession and then have communion." And as he spoke he was again conscious of the same thrill of slightly gloomy pleasure that the list of guests had inspired in him a little earlier. "I'll go and make my confession to Father Lattanzi," he added.

"There's no necessity for you to go to him," said Giulia; "you can go to any confessor, in any church you like."

"And how about communion?"

"Father Lattanzi will administer it the same day we get married . . we go together . . . How long is it since you confessed?"

"Well . . . I don't think I've confessed since my first com-

munion—when I was eight," said Marcello, rather embarrassed, "never since then."

"Just think!" she exclaimed joyfully, "what a tremendous number of sins you'll have to tell them about!"

"Supposing they won't give me absolution?"

"They'll give you absolution all right," she answered affectionately, stroking his face. "In any case, what sins can *you* have to confess? You're good and kind and you've never done anyone any harm . . . They'll give you absolution at once."

"It's a complicated business, getting married," said Marcello casually.

"But I love all these complications and preparations," said Giulia. "After all, we've got to stay together all the rest of our lives, haven't we? . . . Oh, by the way, what are we going to decide about the honeymoon?"

For the first time Marcello was aware of a feeling almost of pity for Giulia, apart from his usual indulgent, straightforward affection for her. He knew that there was still time for him to draw back and, instead of going to Paris, where he had his mission to fulfill, go somewhere else for their honeymoon. He could tell them, at the Ministry, that he refused the job. But at the same time he realized that this was impossible. The mission was the most resolute, the most compromising, the most decisive step on his road toward absolute and final normality; just as his marriage with Giulia, the wedding reception, the religious ceremonies, the confession and communion were all steps in the same direction, although, in his eyes, of less importance.

He did not pause more than a moment to analyze this thought, whose dark, almost sinister background did not escape him, but answered hurriedly: "I thought that after all we might go to Paris."

Giulia, crazy with delight, clapped her hands and exclaimed: "Ah, how wonderful! . . . Paris . . . my dream!" she threw her arms round his neck and kissed him violently. "If you knew how pleased I am! But I didn't want to tell you how I was longing to go to Paris . . . I was afraid it might cost too much."

"One way and another, it'll cost about the same as other places," said Marcello. "But don't worry about the money . . . we'll manage all right this time."

Giulia was in transports of delight. "Oh, how pleased I am!" she repeated. She pressed herself violently against Marcello and murmured: "D'you love me? Why don't you give me a kiss?" And so, once again, Marcello found himself with her arms around his neck and her lips against his. This time the ardor of her kiss seemed redoubled by gratitude. Giulia sighed, she twisted her whole body about, she squeezed Marcello's hand against her breast, she rolled her tongue rapidly and spasmodically inside his mouth. Marcello felt himself becoming excited, and thought, now, this minute, if I wanted to, I could have her, here, on this sofa; and he seemed to be aware, once more, of the fragility of what he called normality. At last they separated, and Marcello said with a smile: "It's lucky we're getting married soon . . . otherwise I'm afraid we'd become lovers, one of these days."

Giulia, still flushed from the kiss, shrugged her shoulders and answered with a kind of exalted, ingenuous shamelessness: "I love you so much . . . I'd ask nothing better."

"Truly?" asked Marcello.

"Yes, this minute," she said boldly, "here, now . . . " She had taken Marcello's hand and was slowly kissing it, looking up at him with shining, impassioned eyes. Then the door opened and she drew back. Giulia's mother came in.

She too, thought Marcello as he watched her approaching,

was one of the large number of characters introduced into his life by his quest for a redeeming normality. There could be nothing in common between him and this sentimental woman, always overflowing with melting tenderness—nothing except his desire to tie himself firmly and lastingly to a human society that was solid and well-established. Giulia's mother, Signora Delia Ginami, was a corpulent lady in whom the slackening processes of mature age appeared to manifest themselves in a sort of disintegration not only of the body but of the mind, the former being afflicted with a quivering, boneless obesity, the latter with a tendency towards the languors of a kindness that was partly natural to her and partly affected. With every step she took, beneath her shapeless clothes whole portions of her swollen body appeared to be heeling over and shifting on their own account, and the slightest trifle was enough to provoke an agonizing emotional disturbance that overcame her powers of control, filling her watery blue eyes with tears, causing her to wring her hands in attitudes of ecstasy. During this period, the imminent marriage of her only daughter had plunged Signora Delia into a condition of perpetual sensibility. She was always weeping—with contentment, as she explained—and she felt, constantly a need to embrace Giulia or her future son-in-law, for whom, she said, she already felt as much affection as if he were her own son. Marcello, filled with embarrassment by these effusions, understood nevertheless that they were merely one aspect of the reality into which he wanted to be absorbed, and as such he endured and appreciated them with the same rather somber satisfaction as was inspired in him by the ugly furniture in the house, by Giulia's conversation, by the wedding celebrations and the ritual demands of Father Lattanzi.

At this moment, however, Signora Delia was in a state not so much of tenderness as of indignation. She was waving a sheet of paper and, after greeting Marcello who had risen to his feet, said, "An anonymous letter . . . but first let's go to the other room . . . it's ready."

"An anonymous letter?" cried Giulia, rushing after her mother.

"Yes, an anonymous letter . . . How disgusting people are!"

Marcello followed them into the dining room, trying to hide his face behind his handkerchief. The news of the anonymous letter seriously disturbed him, and he was determined not to let the two women see it. To hear Giulia's mother exclaim, "An anonymous letter," and immediately to think, "Someone has written about the Lino affair," were for him one and the same thing. The blood had left his face, he had caught his breath and had been overwhelmed by a feeling of consternation, of shame and of fear, inexplicable, unexpected, shattering, a feeling such as he had never known except in the first years of adolescence when the memory of Lino was still fresh. It had been too strong for him; and all his powers of control had been swept away in an instant, just as a thin cordon of policemen might be swept away by the panic-stricken crowd it is supposed to hold back. As he approached the table he bit his lip till it bled. He had been wrong, then, when he had looked up the notice of the crime at the library and had been convinced that the old wound was completely healed; not merely was the wound not healed, but it was far deeper than he had suspected. Luckily his place at the head of the table was against the light, with his back to the window. Stiffly and in silence he sat down, with Giulia on his right and Signora Ginami on his left.

The anonymous letter now lay on the tablecloth be-

side Giulia's mother's plate. The little servant girl had come in, holding in both hands a large dish of spaghetti. Marcello plunged the fork into the red, greasy tangle and lifted a small quantity of it on to his own plate. Immediately the two women began to protest. "Not nearly enough . . . you're trying to starve yourself . . . do take some more." And Signora Ginami added, "You work hard, you must eat." And Giulia impulsively took some more of the spaghetti from the dish and put it on her fiancé's plate.

"I'm not hungry," said Marcello, in a voice that seemed to him absurdly exhausted and distressed.

"Appetite comes with eating," replied Giulia emphatically, helping herself.

The maid went out, carrying away the almost empty dish, and Giulia's mother said at once, "I didn't really mean to show it . . . It didn't seem to me worth while . . . But what a world we live in!"

Marcello said nothing; he bent his face over his plate and filled his mouth with spaghetti. He still feared that the letter was concerned with the Lino affair, although his reason told him that this was impossible. But it was an uncontrollable fear, a fear more powerful than any reflection. Giulia asked, "But surely, mayn't we know what the letter's about?"

Her mother answered, "First of all I want to tell Marcello that, as far as I am concerned, even if the letter contained things a thousand times worse, he can still be sure that my affection for him remains unchanged . . . Marcello, you're a real son to me, and you know that a mother's love for a son is stronger than any insinuation." Her eyes filled with tears, she repeated, "A real son," and seizing Marcello's hand, she carried it to her heart, saying, "Dear Marcello!" Not knowing what to do or say, Marcello sat motionless and silent,

waiting for the effusion to finish. Signora Ginami gazed at him with tenderness in her eyes and then added, "You must forgive an old woman like me, Marcello."

"Don't be absurd, Mummy; you're not old," said Giulia, too well accustomed to these emotional disturbances on her mother's part to attach importance to them or to be surprised.

"Yes, I'm an old woman, I've only a few more years to live," replied Signora Delia. Imminent death was one of her favorite subjects of conversation, for it was not only a moving subject to her, but she thought, perhaps, that it also had the power to move others. "I shall die soon," she went on, "and that's why I'm so very, very pleased to be leaving my daughter in the charge of such a good man, Marcello."

Marcello—who, with his hand held firmly against her heart by Signora Delia, was forced into a most uncomfortable position over the top of his plate of spaghetti—could not repress a very slight movement of impatience that did not escape the old woman. She mistook it for a protest against what he considered to be excessive praise. "Yes, it's true," she repeated; "you *are* good . . . you are *so* good . . . Sometimes I say to Giulia, 'You're a lucky girl to have found such a good young man.' I know quite well, Marcello, that goodness is out of fashion nowadays . . . but you must allow someone who's many years older than you to say it—nothing in the world matters except goodness . . . And you, luckily, you are so very, very, very good."

Marcello frowned and said nothing. "Do let the poor man have something to eat," exclaimed Giulia, "don't you see you're dirtying his sleeve in the gravy?"

Signora Ginami let go Marcello's hand, and taking up the letter, said, "It's a typewritten letter . . . with a Rome postmark . . . I shouldn't be surprised, Marcello, if one of your colleagues at the office hadn't written it."

"But, Mummy, once and for all, mayn't we know what's in it?"

"Here it is," said her mother, handing the letter to Giulia. "Read it . . . but don't read it aloud . . . There are nasty things in it that I don't want to hear . . . Then, when you've read it, give it to Marcello."

Not without some anxiety, Marcello watched his fiancée read the letter. Then, twisting her mouth in scorn, "How disgusting!" Giulia pronounced, and handed it to him. The letter, written on thin typewriter paper, contained only a few lines in the faint ink of a worn-out ribbon. "Signora, in allowing your daugher to marry Dr. Clerici, you are committing something worse than an error, you are committing a crime. Dr. Clerici's father has for years been shut up in a lunatic asylum, with a form of madness which is of syphilitic origin; and, as you know, this malady is hereditary. There is still time; stop the marriage. A friend."

"So that's all," though Marcello, almost disappointed. He seemed to be aware that his disappointment was greater than his relief. It was as if he had been hoping that someone else might share the knowledge of the tragedy of his childhood and so might free him, in part, from the burden of that knowledge. There was one phrase, nevertheless, that struck him: "As you know, this malady is hereditary." He knew perfectly well that the origin of his father's madness was not syphilitic, and that there was no danger of his going mad, some day, in the way his father had done. And yet that phrase, in all its threatening malignity, seemed to him to allude to some other kind of madness that might really be hereditary. This idea, immediately dismissed, no more than touched the surface of his mind. Then he handed back the letter to Giulia's mother, saying calmly, "There's no truth in it."

"I know there's no truth in it," answered the good lady, almost offended. After a moment she went on, "I only know that my daughter is marrying a man who is good, intelligent, honest, serious minded . . . and good-looking too," she added coquettishly.

"Quite particularly good-looking: you needn't be shy about saying so," Giulia confirmed, "and that's why whoever wrote the letter insinuates that he's tainted . . . Seeing him so good-looking, he can't believe that there isn't some hidden worm . . . Brutes . . ."

"I wonder what they would say," Marcello could not help thinking, "if they knew that at the age of thirteen I very nearly had sexual relations with a man, and that I killed him." He noticed, now that the fear aroused by the letter had passed, the usual melancholy, speculative apathy had again come over him. "Probably," he thought, looking at his fiancée and at Signora Ginami, "probably it wouldn't make much impression on them . . . Normal people have thick skins;" and he realized that he was envying the two women for their "thick skins."

All of a sudden he said, "I've got to go and see my father today."

"Are you going with your mother?"

"Yes."

The spaghetti was finished; the little servant girl came in again, changed the plates and put down a dish filled with meat and vegetables on the table. As soon as she had left the room, Giulia's mother took up the letter again and, examining it, said, "I should just like to know who wrote that letter."

"Mummy," said Giulia all at once, with a sudden, excessive seriousness, "give me that letter a minute."

She took the envelope, looked at it carefully, then ex-

tracted the thin sheet of paper, scrutinized it, frowning, and finally exclaimed in a loud, indignant voice, "I know perfectly well who wrote this letter . . . there can't be any doubt about it . . . Oh, what an infamous thing!"

"Who was it then?"

"An unfortunate wretch," replied Giulia, looking down at the table.

Marcello said nothing. Giulia worked as secretary in a lawyer's office, and probably the letter had been written by one of the clerks there. "No doubt some envious person," said her mother. "Marcello, at thirty, has a position that many older men would like to have."

Although his curiosity was not aroused, Marcello asked his fiancée, as a matter of form, "If you know the name of the person who wrote the letter, why don't you tell us?"

"I can't," she answered, more thoughtful, now, than indignant. "But I've told you, he's an unfortunate wretch." She gave the letter back to her mother and helped herself from the dish that the maid handed to her.

For a moment none of the three spoke. Then Giulia's mother began again, in a tone of sincere incredulity, "And yet I can't believe that there can be anyone so bad as to be able to write such a letter about a man like Marcello."

"Not everybody loves him as we do, Mummy," said Giulia.

"But who," her mother burst out with great emphasis, "who could help loving our dear Marcello?"

"You know what Mummy says about you?" asked Giulia, who seemed now to have returned to her usual gaiety and volubility, "—that you're not a man but an angel . . . And so I suppose one of these days. instead of coming into the house by the door, you'll fly in by the window." She suppressed a burst of laughter and went on: "It'll be a great pleasure to the priest when you go to confession, to know

that you're an angel . . . It isn't every day that he listens to the confession of an angel."

"Now you're making fun of me, as usual," said her mother; "but I'm not exaggerating in the least . . . For me, Marcello *is* an angel." She looked at Marcello with intense and sugary tenderness, and her eyes began to fill with tears. She added, after a moment, "In all my life I've known only one man who was as good as Marcello— and that was your father, Giulia."

Giulia now put on a serious look, as though to devote herself to the subject, and looked down at her plate. Her mother's face was undergoing a gradual transformation: an abundance of tears overflowed from her eyes, while a pathetic grimace distorted the soft, puffy features among the stray locks of her loosened hair, so that colors and lineaments appeared confused and dimmed, as though seen through a sheet of glass streaming with water. Hurriedly she searched for her handkerchief, and holding it to her eyes, stammered: "A truly good man . . . truly an angel . . . and we were so happy together, we three . . . and now he's dead he's not here any more. . . . Marcello reminds me of your father, with his goodness, and that's why I'm so very fond of him. . . . When I think that that man who was so good is dead, my heart breaks." The last words were lost in the handkerchief.

Giulia said calmly, "Have something to eat, Mummy."

"No, no, I'm not hungry," sobbed her mother. "You must forgive me, you two. . . . You're happy, and happiness must not be spoiled by the sorrow of an old woman." She rose hastily and went out of the room.

"Just think, it's six years ago," said Giulia, looking at the door, "and yet it's still just as if it was the first day."

Marcello said nothing. He had lit a cigarette and was

smoking with bent head. Giulia put out her hand and took his. "What are you thinking about?" she asked, almost beseechingly.

Giulia often asked him what he was thinking about, for she was often filled with curiosity and even alarm by the serious, reserved expression on his face. Marcello answered, "I was thinking about your mother. . . . Her compliments embarrass me. . . . She doesn't know me well enough to say that I'm good."

Giulia squeezed his hand and replied, "She doesn't say it just as a compliment. . . Even when you're not here, she often says to me, 'How good Marcello is!' "

"But what does *she* know about it?"

"There are some things that can be seen." Giulia rose and came and stood beside him, pressing her rounded hip against his shoulder and passing her hand through his hair. "But why? Don't you want people to think you're good?"

"I don't mean that," answered Marcello. I mean that it may not be true."

She shook her head. "Your trouble is that you're too modest. . . . Now listen—I'm not like Mummy who tries to make out that everyone is good. . . . For me there are good people and bad people. . . . Well, to me, you're one of the best people I've ever met in my life . . . and I don't say that because we're engaged and because I love you . . . . I say it because it's true."

"But what, exactly, does this goodness consist in?"

"I've told you. There are some things that can be seen. . . . Why does one say that a woman is beautiful? . . . Because one *sees* that she is . . . and one sees that you are good."

"Well, so be it," said Marcello, with bowed head. The conviction of the two women that he was good was not new

to him, but he always found it profoundly disconcerting. In what did this goodness consist? Was he then truly good? Was it not rather that the thing which Giulia and her mother called goodness was really his abnormality, in fact his detachment, his remoteness from ordinary life? Normal men were not good, he went on to think, for normality must always be paid for, whether consciously or not, at a high price, with various sorts of complicity of a negative kind—insensibility, stupidity, cowardice if not actual criminality. He was interrupted in these reflections by the voice of Giulia, saying, "By the way, d'you know my dress has come? I want to show it to you. . . Wait here a minute."

She rushed out of the room and Marcello rose from the table, went over to the window and threw it wide open. The window looked out over the street, or rather, since it was the top-floor flat, over the jutting parapet of the building, below which one could see nothing. But beyond this emptiness lay the full extent of the attic floor of the building opposite—a row of windows with shutters open, through which the occupants of the room could be seen. It was a flat very similar to Giulia's: a bedroom, with the beds still unmade; a "good" drawing room with the usual sham, dark-colored furniture; a dining room at whose table three people, two men and a woman, could be seen sitting. These rooms opposite were very near because the street was not wide, and Marcello could distinguish the three people at the dining room table extremely clearly—a thickset, elderly man with a great mane of white hair, a younger man, thin, brown, and a blonde woman of mature, rather opulent figure. They were eating calmly at a table very like the one at which he himself had been sitting shortly before, beneath a chandelier not very different from the one in the room where he now stood. And

yet, although he saw them so clearly that he had almost the illusion of being able to hear their conversation, they seemed to him—perhaps owing to the feeling created by the jutting parapet that there was a gulf between them—to be infinitely far off and remote. He could not help feeling that those rooms represented normality. He could see them. He could, by slightly raising his voice, have spoken to the three people at the table; yet in spite of that he was outside them, not only in a material but also in a moral sense. For Giulia, on the other hand, that remoteness, that foreignness did not exist. They were a purely physical fact and she was *inside* those rooms, had always been inside them; and if he had pointed them out to her she would have produced, with complete indifference, all the information she possessed on the subject of the people who lived in them—just as she had done, a little earlier, about the people invited to the wedding reception. It was an indifference that denoted not merely familiarity but actual inattentiveness. In reality she did not give any name to normality, being completely submerged in it—just as it is to be supposed that animals, if they could talk, would not give any name to the nature of which they form an integral and unconditional part. But he himself remained outside, and normality was called normality, for him, just because he was excluded from it, and because he was conscious of it as such, in contrast to his own abnormality. To be like Giulia, you had either to be born to it, or . . .

The door behind him opened, and he turned. Giulia was there in front of him in her bridal dress of white silk, holding up with both hands, for him to admire, the ample veil that flowed down from her head. She said, exultingly, "Isn't it lovely . . . look!" and, still holding out the veil with both hands, she circled about in the space between the window

and the table so that her future husband might admire the wedding dress from every point of view. The wedding dress resembled every other wedding dress, but Marcello was glad that Giulia should be pleased with this perfectly ordinary dress in exactly the same way in which millions and millions of other women before her had been pleased. The rounded, exuberant curves of Giulia's figure were moulded with clumsy obviousness by the glossy white silk. All at once she came up to Marcello, and dropping the veil and holding up her face toward him, said, "Now give me a kiss . . . but don't touch me, or my dress will get crumpled." At that moment Giulia turned her back to the window and Marcello faced her. As he bent down to touch her lips with his he looked across into the dining room of the flat opposite and saw the white-haired man rise from the table and leave the room. Immediately afterward, the other two, the thin, brown young man and the blonde woman, also rose, almost automatically, and as they stood there they kissed each other. This sight pleased him, for after all he was behaving just like those two people from whom, only a short time before, he had felt himself to be divided by a wholly insuperable gulf. At the same moment Giulia exclaimed impatiently, "Never mind, my dress can go to the devil," and without letting go of Marcello, half closed the shutters with her other hand. Then, pressing her whole body against him, she threw her arms around his neck. They kissed in the darkness, hampered by the veil, and once again, as his fiancée clung tightly to him and wriggled and sighed and kissed him, it struck Marcello that she was acting in all innocence, unconscious of any contradiction between this embrace and her bridal costume; and this was yet another proof that it was permissible for normal people to take the utmost liberties with normality

itself. At last they separated, breathless, and Giulia whispered, "We mustn't be impatient . . . just a few days more and then you'll be able to kiss me even in the street."

"I must go," he said, wiping his mouth with his handkerchief.

"I'll come with you."

They felt their way out of the dining room and into the hall. "We'll see each other this evening, after dinner," Giulia said. Tenderly, lovingly she gazed at him, leaning against the doorpost. The veil, displaced by the kiss, hung untidily on one side. Marcello went up to her and straightened it, saying, "That's all right now." At that moment there was a hum of voices on the landing of the floor below. Giulia, bashful, drew back, threw him a kiss with the tips of her fingers and hurriedly shut the door.

CHAPTER SIX

THE idea of confession did not please Marcello. He was not religious in the sense of formally practicing the prescribed rites; nor was he very sure that he had any natural inclination toward religious feeling; yet he would have been quite willing to look upon the confession demanded by Father Lattanzi as one of the many conventional acts upon which he was embarking with a view to establishing himself, once and for all, as a normal person, had it not been that this matter of confession involved the revelation of two things which for different reasons he felt it quite impossible to confess— the tragedy of his childhood and his mission to Paris. An obscure instinct told him that there was a subtle connection between these two things; and yet it would have been very difficult for him to say clearly what this connection was. Furthermore, he was quite aware that, among the many possible standards of behavior, he had not chosen the Christian standard that forbids man to kill, but another, entirely different one, political and of recent introduction, that had no objection to bloodshed. In Christianity, in fact, as represented by the Church with its hundreds of dignitaries, its innumerable churches, its saints and its martyrs, he did not recognize

the power that was needed to bring him back into that communion with other men from which he had been debarred by the Lino affair—that power which he felt to be implicit in the plump Minister with the lipstick-stained mouth, in the cynical secretary, and in all his superiors in the Secret Service. Marcello was conscious of all this by some obscure intuition rather than by any process of thought, and his melancholy was increased by it for he was like a man who, all other ways being closed, sees but one way out, and that a distasteful one.

But he must make up his mind, he thought as he jumped on the streetcar going toward Santa Maria Maggiore, he must choose between making a complete confession, according to the rules of the Church, or confining himself to a partial, purely formal confession, simply to please Giulia. Although he was neither a practicing nor a believing Christian, he inclined to the first of these alternatives; hoping, almost, by means of his confession, if not to alter his destiny, at least to attach himself firmly to it by yet another tie. As the trolley moved through the streets he debated the problem with his usual rather dull, pedantic seriousness. As far as Lino was concerned, he felt more or less easy. He would be able to tell the story as it had really happened, and the priest, after the usual examination and the usual recommendations, could not but give him absolution. But with regard to the mission which, as he well knew, involved fraud, treachery and, in its last stage, possibly the death of a man, he realized that this was an entirely different matter. The point, in this case, was not so much to obtain approval of it as the mere fact of talking about it. He was not at all sure that he was capable of it; for to speak of it would mean abandoning one standard for another; submitting to Christian judgment something that he had hitherto considered to be

entirely unrelated to it; betraying his implicit obligation of secrecy and silence; in fact, risking the whole carefully built-up edifice of his absorption into normality. All the same, he thought it was worthwhile making the attempt, if only in order to convince himself yet again, by this final certificate of official approbation of the edifice' solidity.

He was aware that he was considering these alternatives without excessive emotion, in a cool, impassive spirit like that of a detached spectator, just as if he had made his choice already and all that had to happen in the future was discounted in advance, though he could not know how or when. He was so little troubled by doubt that when he entered the vast church, filled with a comforting shade and silence and coolness after the glare and noise and heat of the street, he went so far as to forget his confession. He started to wander about over its deserted flagstones, from one aisle to another, like an idle tourist. He had always found churches pleasing to him as safe points in a fluctuating world, constructions by no means casual in which the things that he himself was seeking—order, a standard, a rule of life—had found, in other days, their massive and splendid expression. Very often he would go into a church—numerous as they are in Rome—and sit down on a bench, without praying, in the contemplation of something that might have fitted his own case if only conditions had been different. The thing that attracted him in churches was not the solutions that they offered and that it was impossible for him to accept, but rather a final result he could not but appreciate and admire. He liked all churches; but the more imposing they were, the more magnificent, the more profane, the more he liked them. In such churches, in which religion had evaporated and become a majestic, ordered worldliness,

he seemed to recognize the point of transition from a primitive religious belief to a now adult society which nevertheless, without that far-off belief, could not have existed.

At this hour the church was deserted. Marcello went right up beneath the altar, and then, moving close to one of the pillars of the right-hand aisle, looked down the full length of the floor, seeking to reduce his own stature to nothing and to drop his eye to ground level. How vast the floor looked, seen thus in perspective, as an ant might see it! It seemed like a great plain and made one almost giddy. Then he looked up, and his eye, following the feeble glimmer cast by the dim light upon the rounded surfaces of the immense marble shafts, rebounded from pillar to pillar all the way down to the door where he had entered.

At that moment someone came in, lifting the heavy curtain and letting in a segment of crude white light. How small the figure in the doorway looked, far away at the other end of the church! Marcello went round behind the altar and looked at the mosaics in the apse. The figure of Christ, surrounded by four saints, arrested his attention; whoever had painted Him in that way, he thought, certainly had no doubts about what was normal and what was abnormal. He bent his head as he made his way slowly towards the confessional in the right-hand aisle. He was thinking now that it was useless to regret not having been born in other times and other conditions. He was what he was precisely because the times and conditions in which he was living were no longer the same as those that had permitted the erection of this church; and his whole moral obligation lay in the conscious recognition of this reality.

He went up to the confessional, which, made all of dark carved wood, was proportionate in size to the huge basilica, and was in time to catch a glimpse of the priest sitting

inside it as he drew the curtain across and hid himself; but he did not see his face. With a habitual gesture, as he knelt down, he pulled up his trousers at the knee so that they should not get crumpled; then he said in a low voice, "I want to make my confession."

From the other side came the priest's voice, answering, in a subdued but frank, brisk tone, that he might begin at once. The voice was full and rhythmical, a deep bass, the voice of a mature man with a strong Southern accent. In spite of himself Marcello could not help conjuring up a monkish figure with a face all smothered in black beard, with thick eyebrows, a massive nose, ears and nostrils full of hairs. A man, he felt, made of the same heavy, massive material as the confessional itself, a man without suspicions, without subtleties. The priest, as he had foreseen, asked him how long it was since he had confessed, and he answered that he had never confessed except during his childhood and that he was doing it now because he was intending to get married. After a moment's silence the priest's voice on the other side of the grating said, in a somewhat indifferent tone. "You have done very wrong, my son. . . . And how old are you?"

"Thirty," said Marcello.

"You have lived for thirty years in sin," said the priest, in the tone of an accountant announcing the amount of an overdraft. He resumed after a moment's pause, "For thirty years you have lived like an animal, not like a human being."

Marcello bit his lip. The confessor's authority, as expressed in this brisk, familiar manner of judging his case before he even knew its details, was obnoxious and irritating to him. Not that the priest—probably a good man who performed his office scrupulously—displeased him, nor the place, nor the

rite itself; but in contrast to the Ministry, where everything had displeased him but where authority had seemed to him obvious and unquestionable, here he felt an instinctive desire to rebel. He said, however, with an effort, "I have committed every sin . . . even the worst."

"*Every* sin?"

Now I'm going to say I killed a man, he thought, and I want to see what effect it will have upon me. He hesitated, and then, exerting himself, succeeded in pronouncing in a clear, firm voice, "Yes, every sin; I've even killed a man."

The priest immediately exclaimed in a lively manner but but without either indignation or surprise, "You killed a man and yet you did not feel the need to confess."

Marcello reflected that that was exactly the right thing for the priest to have said: no horror, no surprise, merely an official reproof for not having confessed so grave a sin at the proper time. And he was grateful to the priest, just as he would have been grateful to a police inspector who, faced with the same confession, had placed him, without comment and without delay, under arrest. Everyone had to act his part, and only in that way could the world endure. In the meantime, however, he was conscious that in revealing his own tragedy he again experienced no particular feeling; and he was surprised at this indifference, which was in such strong contrast to his profound agitation of a short time before, when Giulia's mother had announced that she had had an anonymous letter. He said, in a calm voice, "I killed a man when I was thirteen . . . in self-defense . . . and almost without meaning to."

"Tell me how it happened."

He changed his position slightly as his knees were beginning to hurt him, and then began, "One morning when I came out of school a man came up to me with some excuse . . . At that

time I was longing to possess a revolver . . . not a toy one but a real revolver. . . He promised to give me a revolver and so succeeded in making me get into his car. . . He was some foreign lady's chauffeur and had the use of the car all day long because she was away, traveling abroad. . . I was completely ignorant at that time, and when he made certain proposals to me I didn't even understand what it was all about."

"What sort of proposals?"

"Sexual proposals," said Marcello soberly. "I didn't know what sexual love was, either normal or abnormal. . . I got into the car, then, and he took me to his employer's villa."

"And what happened there?"

"Nothing, or practically nothing. . . First of all he made one or two attempts, then he was sorry and made me promise that from then on I wouldn't pay any attention to him, even if he invited me again to get into the car."

"What d'you mean by 'practically nothing'? Did he kiss you?"

"No," said Marcello, slightly surprised, "he only put his arm round my waist, for a moment, in the passage."

"Go on."

"He had foreseen, however, that he would not be able to forget me. . . And the next day he was again waiting for me when I came out of school. . . This time he again told me that he would give me the revolver, and I, longing to possess it, at first hung back a little and then agreed to get into the car."

"Where did you go?"

"As before, to the villa, to his own room. . ."

"And this time, how did he behave?"

"He was quite different," said Marcello; "he seemed quite beside himself. . . He said he wouldn't give me the revolver and that, one way or another, I had to do what he wanted. . .

As he said this he was holding the revolver in his hand. . . Then he took hold of my arm and threw me down on the bed, making me hit my head against the wall. . . The revolver meanwhile had fallen on to the bed and he was kneeling in front of me with his arms round my legs. . . I seized the revolver, jumped up from the bed and took a few steps backward, and then, throwing out his arms, he shouted, 'Kill me, kill me like a dog. . .' Then I—just as if I was obeying him—fired, and he fell back on the bed. . . And I ran away and knew nothing more about it. . . All this happened many years ago. . . Recently I went and looked up the newspapers of that time and found out that the man died that same evening, in hospital."

Marcello had told his tale without hurrying, choosing his words with care and pronouncing them with precision. He was aware, while he was speaking, that as usual he felt nothing—nothing except that cold, remote sadness that was customary with him whatever he said or did. The priest, without commenting in any way on the story, asked at once, "Are you sure you have told the whole truth?"

"Yes, I'm certain," replied Marcello, surprised.

"You know," went on the priest, suddenly arousing himself, "you know that if you keep back or distort the truth or part of it, your confession is not valid, and besides, you commit a grave sacrilege. . . What really happened between you and that man, the second time?"

"But . . . just what I've told you."

"Was there no carnal relation between you? . . . Did he not use violence?"

So murder, Marcello could not help thinking, was less important than the sin of sodomy. He confirmed what he had said, "There was nothing except what I've told you."

"It would appear," continued the priest inflexibly, "that you killed the man to avenge yourself for something that he had done to you. . ."

"He had done absolutely nothing to me."

There was a brief silence, filled, it seemed to him, with ill-disguised incredulity. "And since then," asked the priest all of a sudden, in an entirely unexpected manner, "have you ever had relations with men?"

"No . . . my sexual life has been, and still is, perfectly normal."

"What do you mean by 'normal' sexual life?"

"In that respect I am a man just like any other man. . . The first time I had a woman was in a brothel, at the age of seventeen . . . and since then I have never had any relations except with women."

"And that's what you call a normal sexual life?"

"Yes, why not?"

"But that too is abnormal," said the priest triumphantly; "that too is sin. . . Has nobody ever told you, my poor child? —the normal thing is to marry and have relations with your own wife with the object of bringing children into the world."

"That's just what I'm on the point of doing," said Marcello.

"Good, good, but it's not enough. . . You can't go to the altar with bloodstained hands."

At last we're coming to it, Marcello could not help thinking, for he had almost believed, for a moment, that the priest had forgotten the main object of his confession. He said, as humbly as he could, "Tell me what I must do."

"You must repent," said the priest; "only by a sincere and profound repentance can you expiate the evil you have done."

"I have already repented," said Marcello thoughtfully, "if repentance means a strong desire never to have done certain

things, then I have indeed repented." He would have liked to add: "but this repentance has not been enough . . . it could not be enough." However, he restrained himself.

The priest said hurriedly, "It is my duty to warn you that if what you tell me now is not true, my absolution has no value. . . You know what awaits you if you deceive me?"

"What?"

"Damnation."

The priest uttered this last word with a particular satisfaction. Marcello probed his imagination to see what this word recalled, and found nothing; not even the old picture of the flames of hell. But at the same time he was aware that the word meant more than the priest had intended it to mean. And an anxious shudder ran through him, as though he knew that this damnation, whether he repented or not, was in store for him, and that it was not in the priest's power to save him from it. "I have truly repented," he repeated bitterly.

"And you have nothing else to tell me?"

Marcello was silent for a moment before replying. He realized now that the time had come for him to speak of his mission, which, he knew, would involve actions liable to be condemned—in fact already condemned beforehand—by the rules of Christianity. He had foreseen this moment and had rightly ascribed the greatest importance to his own ability to reveal the mission. And then, with a quiet, melancholy feeling of a discovery that he had expected, he found himself, almost at the moment when he was opening his mouth to speak, held back by an insuperable repugnance. It was not a moral disgust, nor was it shame, nor indeed any sense of guilt; it was something utterly different which had nothing to do with guilt. It was, so to speak, an overruling inhibition, dictated by a profound complicity and loyalty. He *ought not* to speak about his mission, that was all, and this was inti-

mated to him in an authoritative manner by that same conscience which had remained dumb and inert at the moment when he announced to the priest, "I have killed a man." Not entirely convinced, he tried once again to speak, but again he was conscious of that same repugnance halting his tongue and obstructing his utterance, in the automatic manner in which a lock springs open when the key is turned. Once again, therefore, and with even stronger proof, he had confirmation of the power of authority as represented at the Ministry by the contemptible Minister and his no less contemptible secretary. It was, like all other kinds of authority, a mysterious thing which, so it seemed, sank its roots down into the deepest part of his spirit, whereas the Church, apparently so much more authoritative, went no deeper than the surface. And so, for the first time being deceitful he said, "Ought I to tell my fiancée, before we get married, what I've told you today?"

"Have you never said anything about it to her?"

"No, it would be the first time."

"I don't see any necessity for it," said the priest; "you would upset her to no purpose . . . and you would be endangering your family's peace of mind."

"Yes, you're right," said Marcello.

Another silence ensued. Then the priest said, in a conclusive tone, as though he were putting his last and final question: "Tell me, my son, have you ever been a member, or are you a member now, of any subversive group or sect?"

Marcello, who had not expected this question, was disconcerted and, for a moment, silenced. Clearly, he thought, the priest was putting this question by order of his superiors, in order to ascertain the political leanings of his flock. Yet it was significant that he should ask it. He himself, who approached the rites of the Church as a matter of form, considering them as ceremonies unrelated to the society of which

he desired to be a member, was in point of fact being asked by the priest not to put himself in opposition to that society. This was his request, rather than that he should not put himself in opposition to *him.* He would have liked to reply: "No, I am a member of a group that hunts down subversive elements." But he resisted this malicious temptation and simply said, "To tell the truth, I am a government official."

This answer evidently pleased the priest, for, after a short pause, he quietly resumed, "Now you must promise me that you will pray. . . And I don't mean that you must pray just for a few days, or a few months . . . or even a few years . . . but all the rest of your life. . . You must pray for your own soul and for the soul of that man. . . and you must make your wife pray too, and your children, if you have any. . . Prayer is the only thing that can draw God's attention to you and obtain His pity for you. . . Do you understand? . . . And now concentrate your thoughts and pray with me."

Marcello automatically bowed his head and listened through the grating to the subdued, hurrying voice of the priest as he recited a prayer in Latin. And then the priest, in a louder voice and still in Latin, pronounced the form of absolution; and Marcello rose from the confessional.

But, as he passed across in front of it, the curtain was drawn aside and the priest beckoned to him to stop. He saw with surprise that he was just as he had pictured him—rather fat, bald, with a big rounded forehead, thick eyebrows, round brown eyes that were serious but not intelligent, a full-lipped mouth. A country priest, he thought, a mendicant friar. The priest, in the meantime, was holding out toward him, in silence, a little booklet with a colored picture on its cover—the *Life of Saint Ignatius of Loyola* in an edition for young Catholics. "Thank you," said Marcello, examining the little book. The priest made another gesture as though to say

that there was no need to thank him, and drew the curtain again. Marcello walked away to the entrance door.

Just as he was on the point of going out, however, he cast a glance round the church, with its two rows of pillars, its coffered ceiling, its deserted floor, its great altar, and it seemed to him that he was saying farewell forever to an ancient survival of a world such as he longed for and such as he knew could never exist again. It was a kind of mirage in reverse, based upon an irrevocable past from which his steps carried him further and further away. Then he lifted the heavy curtain and went out into the strong light of a clear sky, into the square with its metallic clanging of streetcars and its vulgar background of nondescript buildings and shops.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHEN Marcello got out of the bus in the quarter where his mother lived he became conscious, almost immediately, that he was being followed at some distance by a man. As he walked in a leisurely way down the deserted street, past the walls of gardens, he took a quick look at him. He was a man of middling height, rather stout, with a square face whose expression was honest and good-natured but not without a certain sly cunning such as is often to be seen on the faces of peasants. He was wearing a thin suit that had faded to a color between brown and purple, and a hat that was intended to be light gray was pulled well down on his head but had its brim turned up in front in the proper peasant manner. If he had seen him in the piazza of a small town on market day, Marcello would have taken him for a farm bailiff. The man had traveled up in the same bus as Marcello, had got out at the same stopping-place and now was following him on the opposite pavement without taking much trouble to conceal the fact, regulating his pace according to Marcello's and never for a moment taking his eyes off him. But this fixed stare of his seemed uncertain of itself—just as though the man were

not entirely sure of Marcello's identity and wished to study his face before approaching him.

In this way they walked together the whole way up the hill, in the silence and heat of early afternoon. In the gardens, beyond the railings of the closed gates, there was no one to be seen; nor was there a sign of anyone, up the whole length of the street, beneath the green tunnel formed by the overhanging foliage of the pepper trees. Finally this solitude, this silence made Marcello suspicious, since there were conditions clearly favorable for some surprise or attack, and which might have been deliberately chosen by his pursuer. Brusquely, with sudden decisiveness, he left the pavement and crossed the street to the other man. "Perhaps you were looking for me?" he asked, when he came within a few paces of him.

The man, too, had stopped at Marcello's question, with an almost timid expression on his face. "Excuse me," he said in a low voice, "I only followed you because I thought perhaps we might both be going to the same place . . . otherwise I should not have dreamed of doing so. . . Excuse me, are you by any chance Dr. Clerici?"

"Yes, I am," said Marcello, "and who are you?"

"Orlando, of the Secret Service Police," said the man, giving a kind of military salute. "I was sent by Colonel Baudino. . . He gave me two addresses for you—the boarding house where you live and this address here. . . As I didn't find you at the boarding house, I came to look for you here and it so happened that you were in the same bus. . . It's an urgent matter."

"Come along, then," said Marcello, walking off without more ado toward the gate of his mother's villa. He took a key from his pocket, opened the gate and invited the man to come in. He obeyed, respectfully removing his hat and displaying a perfectly round head with sparse black hair and, at the crown,

a white circular bald patch that looked exactly like a tonsure. Marcello walked in front of him down the path, making for the far end of the garden where he knew there was a pergola with a table and two iron chairs. As he went, he could not help noticing once again the neglected, overgrown look of the garden. The clean white gravel on which, as a child, he had loved to run up and down had disappeared years ago, buried under soil or scattered abroad. The outline of the path, swallowed up in rough grass, could be traced chiefly by the remains of two small myrtle hedges, uneven now, and with gaps in them, but still recognizable. The flower beds running beside the hedges were also smothered in exuberant weeds; the rose trees and other flowering plants were entangled with bristling shrubs and briars in inextricable confusion. Here and there, too, in the shade of the trees, were piles of rubbish, disintegrated packing cases, broken bottles and all sorts of similar objects which are generally consigned to attics. He averted his eyes in disgust from this sight, asking himself, as he had often done before, with a mixture of surprise and discouragement, "Why on earth can't they tidy it up? So little is needed. . . Why is it?" Further on, the path ran between the wall of the villa and the garden wall, that same ivy-covered wall over which, as a child, he had been accustomed to hold communication with his neighbor Roberto. He led the Secret Service agent into the pergola and sat down on the iron chair, inviting him to do the same. But he remained respectfully standing. "There's not very much to tell, sir," he said hastily. "I am entrusted by the Colonel to inform you that you are to stop, on your way to Paris, at S." and he named a town not far from the frontier—"and to go and ask for Signor Gabrio, at 3 Via dei Glicini."

"A change of program," thought Marcello. It was characteristic of the Secret Service, as he knew, deliberately and at

the last moment to make changes of plan, with the object of distributing responsibility and covering up traces. "Where is it I'm to go in Via dei Glicini?" he could not help asking, "is it a private apartment?"

"Well, actually no, Doctor," said the Secret Service man with a broad smile, half knowing and half embarrassed; "it's a bawdy house. . . The proprietress is called Enrichetta Parodi. . . But you must ask for Signor Gabrio. . . The house, like all these places, is open till midnight. . . But it would really be better, sir, if you went early in the morning, when there's nobody there. . . I shall be there too." He was silent for a moment. Then, unable to interpret the complete lack of expression on Marcello's face, he added in embarrassment: "That's just for the sake of security, sir."

Marcello, without saying a word, raised his eyes and considered him for a moment. It was his duty to dismiss him now, but, for some reason unknown to himself—perhaps because of the honest, homely expression on the square, broad face—he wanted to add a word or two, of an unofficial kind, to show that he felt friendly towards him. Finally he asked, at random, "How long have you been in the Service, Orlando?"

"Since 1925, sir."

"And in Italy all the time?"

"Scarcely at all, sir," answered the Secret Service man with a sigh, evidently anxious for a confidential talk; "oh, sir, if I could tell you what my life has been like since then, and what I've been through! . . . Always on the move—Turkey, France, Germany, Kenya, Tunisia . . . never still for an instant." He paused for a moment, gazing fixedly at Marcello; then with rhetorical yet sincere solemnity, he added, "And all for Family and Fatherland, sir."

Marcello again looked up at him as he stood there, hat in

hand, almost at attention; then, with a gesture of dismissal, said: "All right then, Orlando. . . Tell the Colonel I'll stop at S., as he wishes."

"Yes, sir." He saluted and walked away past the wall of the villa.

Left alone, Marcello sat staring into emptiness. It was hot underneath the pergola, and the sun, filtering through the leaves and branches of the Virginia creeper, scorched his face with discs of dazzling light. The painted iron table, that once had been spotless, was now a dirty white, with black and rusty stains where the paint had flaked off. As he looked out from the pergola he could see the part of the garden wall where the opening in the ivy had been, through which he had been accustomed to communicate with Roberto. The ivy was still there, and it might still have been possible to look through into the next-door garden; but Roberto's family no longer lived there, and the villa was now occupied by a dentist who received his clients in his own home. Suddenly a lizard ran down the stem of the Virginia creeper and came fearlessly forward on to the table. It was a big lizard of the most common type, with a green back and a white belly that throbbed against the yellowish paint of the table. Rapidly, with little darting steps, it came quite close to Marcello and then stopped dead, its sharp head raised in his direction, its little black eyes staring in front of it. He looked at it with affection, and did not move for fear of frightening it. He remembered the time when as a boy he had slaughtered the lizards and then, to rid himself of his remorse, had in vain sought to involve the timid Roberto as his partner and ally. At the time he had not succeeded in finding anybody to lighten the burden of his guilt. He had been left to face the death of the lizards alone; and in that loneliness he had recognized the evidence of his crime. But now, he thought, he was not, he never again would

be, alone. Even if he committed a crime—provided he committed it for certain ends—he would have the State at his back, as well as its dependent political, social and military organizations, great masses of people who thought as he did, and, outside Italy, other states, other millions of people. What he was going to do, he reflected, was a worse thing than killing a few lizards; and yet there were so many people on his side, beginning with the honest Secret Service man Orlando, a married man and the father of five children. "For Family and Fatherland"; that phrase, so ingenuous in spite of its solemnity, was like a fine, bright-colored banner flying in a joyful breeze on a sunny day while trumpets sound and soldiers march; and it echoed in his ears, inspiring yet sad, mingling hope with melancholy. "For Family and Fatherland," he thought, "that's enough for Orlando . . . why can't it be enough for me too?"

As he sat there, he heard the sound of a car from the direction of the entrance gate, and at once rose with a brusque movement that scared the lizard away. Without hurrying, he left the pergola and walked toward the gate. An old, black motorcar was standing in the avenue, not far from the still open gate. The chauffeur, in a white livery with blue facings, was just closing it, but when he saw Marcello he stopped and raised his cap.

"Alberi," said Marcello in his quietest voice, "we're going to the clinic today, so there's no need to put the car in the garage."

"Very good, Signor Marcello," replied the chauffeur. Marcello glanced at him sideways. Alberi was a young man with an olive complexion and coal-black eyes with whites like glossy white china. He had very regular features, close-set white teeth, carefully oiled black hair. He was not tall, yet he gave the effect of being built on a large scale, perhaps because

of the smallness of his hands and feet. He was of the same age as Marcello, but appeared older, owing, possibly, to a kind of Oriental softness that insinuated itself into each of his features and looked as though, with time, it would inevitably turn to plumpness. As he was closing the gate Marcello looked at him again, with aversion, then he walked away toward the house.

He opened the french window and went into the drawing room, that was almost in darkness. He was immediately struck by the musty, unwholesome smell hanging in the air, comparatively slight in contrast to that of the other rooms where his mother's ten Pekinese dogs roamed freely, but all the more noticeable here where they scarcely ever penetrated. When he opened the window a little light came into the room and for a moment he saw the furniture in its gray dust covers, the rolled-up carpets standing upright in the corners, the piano muffled in sheets pinned together. He went through the drawing room and dining room and out into the hall and then started up the stairs. Half way up, on a bare marble step (the carpet, worn out, had vanished long since and never been replaced) lay a piece of dog's excrement, and he made a detour so as not to step in it. When he reached the landing he went straight to the door of his mother's room and opened it. He had barely had time to do so before all ten Pekinese, like a long-contained flood of water that suddenly overflows, surged out between his legs and rushed, barking, all over the landing and staircase. Hesitating in the doorway, he watched them irritably as they ran away, with their elegant, feathery tails and their sulky, almost catlike muzzles. Then, from the gloomy half-darkness of the room, came his mother's voice, "Is that you, Marcello?"

"Yes, Mother, it's me. . . But what about these dogs?"

"Let them go . . . poor little angels . . . they've been shut

up all the morning . . . yes, yes . . . you can let them go."

Marcello frowned ill-humoredly and went into the room. The air there seemed to him quite unbreathable: the windows had been shut since the night before and a close, stuffy smell, mingled with the smell of dogs and of perfume, hung everywhere; and the heat of the sun on the outside of the shutters seemed to make all these smells ferment and turn sour. Stiffly, watchfully, as if he feared by moving to dirty himself or to become impregnated with these unpleasant odors, he went over to the bed and sat down on the edge of it, his hands resting on his knees.

As his eyes became gradually accustomed to the semi-darkness, he could see the whole room. Underneath the window, in the diffused light which penetrated through the long curtains, soiled and yellow with age—that looked to him as though they were made of the same flimsy material as the many intimate garments scattered about the room—stood a long row of aluminum plates containing the dogs' food. The floor was littered with slippers and stockings. Near the bathroom door, in an almost dark corner, he caught a glimpse of a pink dressing gown hanging over a chair, just as it had been thrown there the evening before, half on the ground and with one sleeve dangling. From its survey of the room his cold, disgusted glance traveled to the bed upon which his mother lay. As usual she had not thought to cover herself when he came in, and was half naked. Lying back against the head of the bed with its worn and dingy blue silk upholstery, her hands clasped behind her head, she stared at him in silence. Beneath the mass of her hair, divided into two puffed-out, brown wings, her face showed pale and thin, almost triangular, dominated by the eyes that looked large and cadaverously dark in the dim light.

She was wearing a greenish transparent undergarment

reaching barely to the top of her thighs; and once again he was forced to think of her, not as the middle-aged woman she really was, but as an elderly, dried-up little girl. The ribs in her fleshless chest stood out like a rack made of small, sharp bones; and her sunken breasts were visible through the transparent material as two round, dark patches of perfect flatness. But it was above all her thighs that aroused a feeling of disgust and of pity in Marcello: thin and puny, they were just like those of a little girl of twelve who has not yet started to develop her womanly shape. His mother's age betrayed itself by marks in her wasted skin and by the color, a frigid, sickly whiteness with mysterious bluish or livid patches. "Bruises," he thought, "or bites, from Alberi." But below the knees her legs still looked perfect, as did her very small feet with their close-set toes. Marcello would have preferred not to let his mother see his ill-humor; but once again he could not restrain himself. "How many times have I asked you not to receive me like that—almost naked?" he said scornfully, and without looking at her.

Impatiently, but without rancor, she replied: "Ugh, what a very strict son I've got!"—and drew a corner of the bed cover over herself. Her voice was hoarse; and this, too, displeased Marcello. He recalled how, when he was a child, it had been sweet and clear as a song; this hoarseness was the result of drink and other forms of excess.

After a moment he said, "Well, we're going to the clinic today."

"Very well, we'll go," said his mother, pulling herself up and groping for something behind the head of the bed; "though I feel dreadfully ill and though our going to see him makes no difference, one way or another, to him, poor man."

"Still, he's your husband and my father," said Marcello, staring at the floor with his head between his hands.

"Yes, of course he is," she said. She had now retrieved the electric cord and pressed the switch. This turned on a dim lamp on the bedside table that looked to Marcello as if it were wrapped around with a pair of women's drawers. "And yet," she went on, rising from the bed and putting her feet to the ground, "to tell you the truth, sometimes I wish he would die. . . He himself wouldn't even know it . . . and I wouldn't have to go on paying all that money for the clinic. . . I've so little. . . Just think," she added in a suddenly mournful tone, "just think, I may have to give up the car."

"Well, really, would that matter?"

"It would matter very much," she said with childish resentment and shamelessness. "As it is, with the car, I have an excuse for keeping Alberi and seeing him whenever I want to. . . If I give it up, I shan't have that excuse any more."

"My dear Mother, don't talk to me about your lovers," said Marcello calmly, digging the nails of one hand into the palm of the other.

"My lovers! . . . He's the only one I've got. . . If you talk to me about that silly hen of a girl you're going to marry, I've a perfect right to talk about him, poor dear; he's far more attractive and intelligent than she is."

Curiously, these insults to his fiancée uttered by his mother, who could not bear Giulia, did not offend Marcello. Perhaps it's true, he said to himself, perhaps she really is rather like a hen . . . but I like her to be like that. In a softened tone, he said, "Well then, are you going to get dressed? If we're going to the clinic, it's time we went."

"All right, just a moment." Moving lightly, almost like a shadow, she crossed the room on tiptoe, picking up the pink dressing gown from the chair as she passed and throwing it over her shoulders. Then she opened the bathroom door and vanished.

As soon as his mother had gone out, Marcello went over to the window and opened it wide. The air outside was hot and still, but he felt an acute sense of relief, as though he were looking out onto a glacier instead of a stuffy garden. At the same time he seemed almost to be aware of a movement of the air in the room behind him; heavy with stale perfumes and with the stink of animals, it seemed to stir gradually, to pass slowly out through the window and then dissolve into space, like a huge aerial vomit overflowing from the throat of the polluted house. He stood there for some time, looking down at the thick foliage of the wistaria whose branches encircled the window, then turned back into the room. The disorder and the air of neglect struck him afresh, but this time they aroused in him more sadness than disgust.

In a flash he remembered his mother as she had been in her youth; and he had a strong and sickening feeling of consternation and rebellion at the decadence and corruption that had changed her from the girl she had been into the woman she was now. There was certainly something both incomprehensible and irreparable at the bottom of this transformation. It was neither age, nor passions, nor financial ruin, nor feeble intelligence, nor any other precise cause. It was something that he felt without being able to explain it, something that seemed to him to be an essential part of her life, in fact to have once constituted its chief merit, but that had since become by some mysterious transmutation, its mortal bane. He left the window and went over to the chest-of-drawers, on which, among a mass of rubbish, stood a photograph of his mother as a young woman. As he looked at the delicate face, at the innocent eyes, at the pretty mouth, he asked himself in horror why she was no longer as she had been then. As he asked himself that question there rose again to the surface of his mind the feeling of repugnance he had for any form of

corruption or decadence, a repugnance now rendered even more intolerable by a bitter feeling of filial remorse and sorrow. Perhaps it was *his* fault that his mother had been reduced to this state. Perhaps if he had loved her more or in a different way she would not have gone to pieces in this squalid and hopeless manner. He felt his eyes fill with tears at this thought, so that the portrait became dim and misty, and he shook his head vigorously. At the same moment the bathroom door opened and his mother appeared on the threshold in her dressing gown. She quickly covered her eyes with her arm, exclaiming, "Shut that window . . . shut it at once. . . How can you bear that bright light?"

Marcello hastily lowered the shutter, then he moved close to his mother, and taking her by the arm, made her sit down beside him on the edge of the bed and asked her gently, "And you Mother, how can you bear this disorder?"

She looked at him, hesitating, embarrassed. "I don't know how it happens," she said, "Every time I use something I ought to put it back in its place . . . but, somehow or other, I never manage to remember."

"Mother," said Marcello, all of a sudden, "every age has its own kind of dignity. . . Why, Mother, why have you let yourself go in this way?"

He was pressing her hand; and she, with the other hand, was holding up a hanger from which dangled a dress. For one moment he thought he detected a sign of genuine grief in those huge, childishly distressed eyes, and his mother's lips trembled slightly. Then an expression of annoyance chased away all other emotions. She exclaimed, "Everything that I am, everything that I do, displeases you, I know that. . . You can't bear my dogs, or my clothes, or my habits. . . But I'm young still, my dear boy, and I want to enjoy life in my own way. . . And now leave me alone," she concluded, snatching

away her hand, "otherwise, how will I ever get dressed?"

Marcello said nothing. His mother went into a corner, slipped out of her dressing gown and dropped it on the floor, then opened the wardrobe and put on her dress in front of the looking glass on its door. When she was dressed the excessive thinness of her sharp hips, of her hollow shoulders and her fleshless bosom was even more clearly revealed. She looked at herself for a moment in the mirror, turning from side to side, while with one hand she arranged her hair; then, hopping this way and that, she slipped her feet into two of the many shoes that lay scattered about the floor. "And now let's go," she said, taking up a bag from the chest-of-drawers and moving toward the door.

"Aren't you going to put on a hat?"

"Why should I? There's no need."

They started to go downstairs. "You haven't said anything to me about your wedding," she said.

"I'm getting married the day after tomorrow."

"And where are you going for your honeymoon?"

"To Paris."

"The traditional honeymoon," she said. When she reached the hall she went to the kitchen door and called to the cook. "Matilde. . . Will you be so kind—call the dogs in before it gets dark."

They went out into the garden. Beyond the trees the car was standing, black and dingy, in the drive. "Well then," she said, "it's decided that you don't want to come and live here with me? . . . Although I don't find your wife attractive, I would have made even that sacrifice. . . Besides, I've so much room."

"No, Mother," answered Marcello.

"You prefer to go to your mother-in-law's," she said lightly, "to that horrible flat: four rooms and a kitchen." She bent

down as if to pick a blade of grass, but in so doing stumbled and would have fallen had not Marcello quickly seized her arm and held her up. He felt beneath his fingers the soft, meager flesh or her arm that seemed to move around the bone like a rag tied round a stick; and again he was moved with pity for her. They got into the car, Alberi, cap in hand, holding open the door. Then Alberi took his place and drove the car out through the gate. Marcello took advantage of the moment when he got out again to shut the gate behind them to say to his mother, "I would be perfectly willing to come and live with you—if you sacked Alberi and tidied up your life a bit . . . and stopped those injections."

She looked at him sideways with uncomprehending eyes. But her thin, sharp nose was trembling slightly, and finally this trembling spread to her small, faded mouth, in a pale, wry smile. "D'you know what the doctor says?" she asked. "That one of these days I might die from them."

"Why don't you stop them, then?"

"Will you tell me *why* I should stop them?"

Alberi got into the car again and put on his dark glasses. Marcello's mother leaned forward and put her hand on the chauffeur's shoulder. It was a thin, transparent hand with the skin stretched tight over the tendons and blotchy with red and bluish marks; and the scarlet of the nails was almost black. Marcello tried not to look, but could not help it. He saw her hand move along the man's shoulder until it tickled his ear in a light caress. Then she said: "Well, we're going to the clinic."

"Very good, madam," said Alberi, without turning his head.

She closed the dividing pane of glass and threw herself back on the cushions as the car moved gently away. As she fell back on the seat she looked obliquely at her son, and to the surprise of Marcello, who was not expecting such intuition

on her part, she said, "You're angry because I gave Alberi a little caress, aren't you?"

As she spoke she looked at him with the childish, despairing, slightly twisted smile that was characteristic of her. Marcello tried, unsuccessfully, to alter the disgusted expression on his face. "I'm not angry," he answered. "But I'd rather not have seen."

Averting her head, she said: "You can't know what it means for a woman not to be young any more. . . It's worse than death."

Marcello was silent. The car was moving along silently now beneath the pepper trees, whose feathery branches rustled against the glass of the windows. After a moment she went on, "There are times when I wish I was old already. . . I shall be a thin, clean little old woman"—she smiled with pleasure, her attention already distracted by this vision of herself—"like a dried flower that's been kept between the pages of a book." She put her hand on Marcello's arm and asked him, "Wouldn't you like to have a little old woman like that for a mother—well seasoned and well preserved, as if she'd been put away in naphthaline?"

Marcello looked at her and answered with some embarrassment, "That's what you'll be like, some day."

She became serious, and, looking up at him with a dismal smile, said, "D'you really think so? . . . On the contrary, I'm convinced, myself, that you'll find me dead, one morning, in that room you so detest."

"Why, Mother?" asked Marcello; but he realized that his mother was speaking seriously and might even be right. "You're young and you must go on living."

"That doesn't prevent me from dying soon. . . I know it; they read it in my horoscope." Suddenly she held up her

hand, right under his eyes, adding, without any transition, "D'you like this ring?"

It was a heavy ring with an elaborate setting around a hard stone of a milky color. "Yes," said Marcello, scarcely looking at it, "it's lovely."

"You know," went on his mother volubly, "sometimes I think you've inherited everything from your father. . . He too, in the days when he still had his reason, didn't like anything. . . Beautiful things meant nothing to him. . . The only thing he thought of was politics—just like you."

This time, without knowing why, Marcello was unable to repress a strong feeling of irritation. "It seems to me," he said, "that my father and I have nothing at all in common. . . I'm a perfectly reasonable person, normal, whereas he, even before he went to the clinic—from what I remember, and you've always confirmed it—was always . . . how shall I say? . . . rather excitable."

"Yes, but there is something in common between you. . . You neither of you get any fun out of life and you don't want other people to do so. . ." She looked out of the window for a moment and then added suddenly, "I shan't come to your wedding. . . But anyhow you mustn't be offended, because I don't go anywhere nowadays. . . But since, after all, you are my son, I think I ought to give you a present. . . What would you like?"

"Nothing, Mother," answered Marcello indifferently.

"What a pity!" said his mother ingenuously. "If I'd known you wanted nothing, I wouldn't have spent the money. . . But now I've bought it. . . Look!" She fumbled in her bag and brought out a small white box with an elastic band round it. "It's a cigarette case. . . I noticed that you always carry the pack in your pocket. . ." She opened the box, took out a flat

silver case engraved with stripes close together, flipped it open and held it out to her son. It was filled with Oriental cigarettes, and she took the opportunity of helping herself to one and making Marcello light it for her.

He was a little embarrassed, and, looking at the cigarette case lying open on his mother's knee, said, without touching it, "It's a very beautiful one and I don't know how to thank you, Mother. . . Perhaps it's even a little too beautiful for me."

"Ugh," said his mother, "how tiresome you are!" She closed the case and, with a prettily intolerent gesture, poked it into Marcello's coat pocket. The car turned the corner of a street rather sharply, and she fell on top of him. She took advantage of this to put her two hands on his shoulders, throwing back her head slightly and looking at him. "Won't you give me a kiss," she said, "in return for the present?"

Marcello bent down and touched his mother's cheek with his lips. She threw herself back in her seat and said with a sigh, putting her hand on her breast, "How hot it is! . . . When you were little, I shouldn't have had to ask you for a kiss. . . You were such an affectionate little boy."

"Mother," said Marcello all of a sudden, "d'you remember the winter when Father was first taken ill?"

"Indeed I do," said his mother, "it was a terrible winter. . . He wanted a separation from me, and to carry you off with him. . . He was mad already. . . Lucky—I mean luckily for you—he went completely mad, and then it was obvious that I was right in wanting to keep you with me. . . But why?"

"Well, Mother," said Marcello, taking care not to look at her, "what I dreamed of, all that winter, was not to go on living with you any more—with you and Father— but to be sent away to school. . . Not that that prevented me from being fond of you. . . That's why, when you say that I've

changed since then, you're saying something that isn't right. . . I was just the same then as I am now . . . and then, as now, I couldn't bear hubbub and disorder . . . that's all." He had spoken drily, almost harshly, but almost at once he repented, seeing a mortified expression darkening his mother's face. And yet he did not want to say anything that might sound as though he were retracting. He had spoken the truth, and that, indeed, was the only thing he could do. At the same time he was again conscious, more intensely than ever, of the oppression of his customary melancholy, reawakened by the unpleasant realization that he had been lacking in filial piety. His mother said in a resigned tone of voice, "Perhaps you're right." At that moment the car came to a stop.

They got out and walked to the gate of the clinic. The street lay in a quiet neighborhood, on the edge of an ancient royal villa. It was a short street. On one side there was a row of five or six old-fashioned suburban houses partially hidden among trees. Along the other side ran the railings of the clinic. At the end of the street the view was blocked by the old gray wall and the thick vegetation of the royal park. Marcello had been visiting his father at least once a month for many years; yet he had never grown accustomed to these visits, and he always experienced a mingled feeling of repugnance and discomfort. It was much the same sort of feeling that he had when he went to see his mother in the house in which he had spent his childhood and youth. But it was very much stronger. His mother's disorder and decay seemed still to be curable; but for his father's madness there was no remedy, and it seemed to point to a disorder and decay of a more general, and utterly incurable, kind. And so, as he came into that quiet street at his mother's side, his heart was oppressed by a hateful sensation of wretchedness and his knees shook. He was aware that he had turned pale, and for

a moment, as he cast a hasty glance at the black spikes of the railings, he felt a hysterical desire to give up the visit and make some excuse to run away. His mother, who had not noticed his agitation, stopped in front of the small black iron gate and pressed the clinic push button saying, "D'you know what his latest fixation is?"

"What?"

"He thinks he's one of Mussolini's ministers. . . It began about a month ago. . . I suppose because they let him read the papers."

Marcello frowned but said nothing. The gate opened and a young male nurse appeared: he wore a white robe and was tall and plump and fair, with a shaven head and a white, puffy face. "Good day, Franz," said Marcello's mother graciously. "How is he?"

"We're better today than yesterday," said the young man, speaking with a harsh German accent. "Yesterday we were very bad."

"Very bad?"

"We had to put on the strait jacket," explained the male nurse, still speaking in the plural, in the affected manner of a governess speaking of her charges.

"The strait jacket. . . How awful!" In the meantime they had passed through the gate and were walking along a narrow path between the surrounding wall and the wall of the clinic. "The strait jacket, you ought to see it. . . It's not really a jacket, it's like two sleeves that hold the arms still. . . Before I saw it, I used to imagine it was like a nightshirt, one of those with a Greek key pattern at the bottom. . . It's so sad to see him tied up like that, with his arms tight against his sides." She went on talking in a light, almost gay, tone of voice.

They went round the clinic and came out into an open

space in front of the main façade. The clinic, a white, three-floored suburban villa, had the appearance of an ordinary dwelling, apart from the iron gratings over the windows. Hurrying up the stairs under the porch, the male nurse said, "The Professor's expecting you, Signora Clerici." He preceded the two visitors into a bare, rather dark entrance hall and went and knocked at a closed door, above which was an enameled plate with the word "Director" on it.

The door opened and the director of the clinic, Professor Ermini, came rushing out, his towering, massive figure bearing down upon his visitors. "Signora, I'm delighted to see you. . . Doctor Clerici, how are you?" His stentorian voice echoed like a bronze gong through the frozen silence of the clinic, between its bare walls, Marcello's mother put out a hand which the professor, bending with visible effort, his huge body enveloped in its robe, gallantly insisted on kissing; Marcello himself, on the other hand, greeted him with the utmost sobriety. The professor's face was extremely like that of a white owl, with large round eyes, a big, curved, beaklike nose, tufts of red mustache falling over a wide, clamorous mouth. Its expression, however, was not that of the melancholy night bird, but was jovial, though with a joviality that was carefully studied and shot through with a kind of cold wariness. He led Marcello and his mother up the stairs. When they were half way up, a metal object, hurled violently from the landing above, came bouncing down the stairs. At the same time a piercing scream rang out, followed by a peal of scornful laughter. The professor bent and picked up the object, an aluminum plate. "It's Signora Donegalli," he said, turning towards the two visitors. "Don't be alarmed. . . She's just an old lady who's usually perfectly quiet but who, every now and then, gets excited and throws anything she can lay her hands on. . ." He laughed. "Why, she'd be a champion bowls-

player, if we let her. . ." He handed the plate to the male nurse and walked on, chattering, down a long corridor between two rows of closed doors. "Why, Signora, you're still in Rome? I thought you'd gone off to the mountains or by the sea by this time."

"I'm going in about a month," she replied. "But I don't know where. . . For once I should like *not* to go to Venice."

"You take my advice, Signora," said the professor, as he turned a corner in the corridor, "and go to Ischia. . . . I was there just the other day on a trip. . . . It's really marvelous. . . . We went to a restaurant kept by a certain Carminiello, where we had a fish soup that was a positive poem." The professor turned half around and made a vulgar but expressive gesture with two fingers at the corner of his mouth. "A poem, I tell you—hunks of fish as big as that . . . and a bit of everything besides—little octopuses, rascasse, dog fish, small oysters—the latter particularly good—shrimps, small cuttlefish . . . all combined with a delicious gravy *alla maringara* . . . garlic, oil, tomato, sweet peppers. . . . Signora, words fail me." After assuming a comic, Neopolitan accent for his description of the fish soup, the professor fell back into his native Roman, and added, "D'you know what I said to my wife?—How about getting a nice little house in Ischia before the year's out?"

"Personally, I prefer Capri," said Marcello's mother.

"But that's a place for literary people and inverts," and the professor in a rather brutal way. At that moment a series of piercing shrieks reached them from one of the cells. The professor went to the door, opened the peep hole, looked through it for a few seconds, closed it again, and turning back, concluded, "Ischia, my dear Signora. . . . Ischia is the place. Fish soup, sea, sun, life in the open air . . . there's nowhere like Ischia."

Franz, the male nurse, who had been walking a few steps in front of them, now stood waiting beside one of the doors, his massive figure clear cut against the bright light from the window at the end of the corridor. "Has he taken up his usual position?" asked the professor in a low voice. The young man nodded. The professor opened the door and went in, followed by Marcello and his mother.

It was a small, bare room, with a bed fixed to the wall and a white wooden table facing a window with the usual iron grating over it. Sitting at the table with his back to the door, busily writing, Marcello, with a shudder of disgust, saw his father. A tousled mass of white hair stuck out from his head above his thin neck, half hidden by the wide collar of his stiff cape of striped cloth. He was sitting slightly askew, his feet thrust into two huge felt slippers, his elbows and knees turned outwards, his head on one side. Exactly, thought Marcello, like a puppet with broken wires. The entrance of his three visitors did not make him turn around; on the contrary, he seemed to redouble his attention and zeal over what he was writing. The professor went and stood between the window and the table and said with false joviality, "Well, Major, how goes it today? . . . How are you?"

The madman did not answer; he merely raised his hand, as much as to say, "One moment, don't you see I'm busy?" The professor gave Marcello's mother an understanding look and said, "Still at that report, eh, Major? But isn't it going to be too long? . . . The Duce hasn't time to read things if they're too long. . . . He himself is always brief, concise. . . . Brevity, conciseness, Major."

The madman made the same sign as before, waving his bony hand; then, with a strange, wild craziness, he threw

a sheet of paper up into the air over his own bowed head. It landed in the middle of the room, and Marcello bent and picked it up. It contained nothing but a few incomprehensible words in a writing full of flourishes and underlinings. Marcello could not be sure even that they were words. While he was examining the paper, the madman began throwing more pieces into the air, still with the same gesture as though he were furiously busy. The sheets of paper came flying up over his white head and were scattered about all over the room. As he threw them up in the air, his gestures became more and more violent, and soon the whole room was full of little sheets of square paper. "Poor dear," said Marcello's mother; "he always did have a passion for writing."

The professor bent forward slightly to speak to the madman. "Major," he said, "here are your wife and son. . . . Don't you want to see them?"

This time the madman spoke, at last, in a low, muttering, hurried, hostile voice, like someone who has been disturbed in the middle of an important occupation. "Let them come back tomorrow . . . unless they have any concrete proposals to make. . . . Can't you see my antechamber's filled with people that I shan't have time to receive?"

"He thinks he's a minister," Marcello's mother whispered to him.

"Minister for Foreign Affairs," the professor confirmed.

"That Hungarian affair," said the madman all of a sudden in an urgent, subdued, troubled voice, still busily writing, "that Hungarian affair. . . . And the head of the government in Prague. . . . And what are they doing in London? And the French, why can't they understand? But *why* can't they understand? Why? Why? Why?" With each "why?" the voice of the madman rose higher, until finally with

the last one that he almost screamed, he leaped from his chair and turned around, facing his visitors. Marcello raised his eyes and looked at him. Beneath the white, upstanding hair, the thin, brown, wasted face, with its deeply scored, vertical wrinkles, bore imprinted upon it an expression of solemn, conscientious gravity, of anguish, almost, from the effort of rising to an imaginary occasion of speech-making and ceremony. The madman was holding one of his little sheets of paper on a level with his eyes; and without more ado he began reading, with a strange, breathless haste: "Duce, leader of heroes, king of earth and sea and sky, prince, priest, emperor, commander and soldier"—here he made a gesture of impatience, tempered however by a certain ceremoniousness, as much as to say, "et cetera, et cetera"—"Duce, in this place, which . . ."—and he made another gesture, as if to say, "I'll skip that part, it's superfluous"—then he started again: "In this place I have written a report that I beg you to read from the first"—he stopped and looked at his visitors—"to the last line. Here is my report."

After these introductory words, he threw the sheet of paper up in the air, turned toward the table, took up another and began reading the report. But this time Marcello could not catch a single word: it was true that the madman was reading clearly and distinctly, but his extraordinary haste caused him to run one word into another as if the entire speech consisted of one single word of inordinate length. The words, thought Marcello, must be melting upon his tongue even before he uttered them, as though the devouring fire of madness had dissolved their shapes like wax and fused them into a single oratorical substance, of a soft, elusive indistinctness. As he went on reading, the words seemed to enter more inextricably one into the other, be-

coming shorter and shorter and more and more contracted, and the madman himself began to appear overwhelmed by this verbal avalanche. With increasing frequency he took to throwing away the sheets of paper after he had read only the first line; until finally he broke off his reading altogether, leaped with surprising agility onto the bed, and there, retreating into the corner at its head, standing upright against the wall, plunged into a declamatory speech.

That he thought himself to be haranguing an audience, Marcello understood more from his gestures than from his words which, as before, were disconnected and senseless. Like an orator facing a crowd from an imaginary balcony, the madman now raised both arms toward the ceiling; now bent forward with one hand outstretched, as though to introduce some subtle point; now threatened, with fist clenched; now raised his hands, palms outward, to the level of his face. At a certain point there was evidently a burst of applause from the imaginary crowd he was addressing; for the madman, holding out his hand in a characteristic gesture with palm turned downward, seemed to be demanding silence. But the applause, clearly, did not cease, in fact it increased in intensity; and then, having again asked for silence with that same gesture of entreaty, the madman jumped down from the bed, ran across to the professor and, holding him by the sleeve, implored him in a tearful voice, "Do please make them keep quiet. . . . What does applause matter to me? . . . A declaration of war. . . . How can one make a declaration of war if their applause prevents one from speaking?"

"We'll make the declaration of war tomorrow, Major," said the professor, looking down at the madman from the height of his towering figure.

"Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow," yelled the madman

in a sudden excess of fury in which anger was mingled with despair, "it's always tomorrow. . . . The declaration of war has got to be made now . . . at once."

"But why, Major? What does it matter? Now, in this heat? Those poor soldiers, d'you want to make them fight in this heat?" The professor slyly wriggled his shoulders.

The madman looked at him in perplexity, obviously disconcerted by his objection. Then he cried, "The soldiers must eat ices. . . . People eat ices in the summer, don't they?"

"Yes," said the professor, "people eat ices in the summer."

"Well then," said the madman with a triumphant air, "ices, lots of ices, ices for everybody." Muttering, he went to the table, and, still standing, seized hold of his pencil and scribbled a few words on a remaining sheet of paper and then handed it to the doctor. "Here's the declaration of war," he said. "I'm not going to have anything more to do with it. . . . You must take it to the right person. . . . Oh, these bells, oh, oh, these bells." He gave the paper to the doctor and then went and crouched down on the floor in the corner beside the bed, like a terrified animal, clutching his head with his two hands and repeating in an anguished voice: "Oh, these bells. . . . Couldn't these bells stop for a moment?"

The doctor cast a quick glance at the sheet of paper and then handed it to Marcello. At the top of the page was written, "Murder and melancholy," and, lower down, "War is declared," all of it in the same large handwriting with elaborate flourishes. " 'Murder and melancholy' is his motto," said the doctor. "You'll find it written on all these sheets. . . . He has a fixation about those two words."

"The bells," whimpered the madman.

"Does he really hear them?" asked Marcello's mother, puzzled.

"Yes, probably. . . . They're hallucinations of the hearing, just as the applause was, previously. . . . People suffering from these disorders can hear different kinds of noises, even voices speaking real words . . . or the sounds made by animals . . . or the noise of an engine, a motorcycle, for instance."

"The bells!" screamed the madman in a terrible voice.

Marcello's mother retreated towards the door, murmuring, "It must be frightful. . . . Poor dear, there's no knowing what he's suffering. . . . I know that I myself, if I happen to be underneath a bell tower when they're ringing the bells, I feel I'm going mad."

"But does he suffer?" asked Marcello.

"Wouldn't you suffer if for hours and hours you heard great bronze bells ringing very close to your ear?" The professor turned to the sick man and added, "Now we'll make the bells stop ringing. . . . We'll send the bell-ringer to sleep. . . . We'll give you something to drink and you won't hear them any more." He made a sign to the male nurse, who immediately went out. Turning to Marcello again, he went on, "These are rather serious forms of disorder. . . . The patient passes from a state of frantic cheerfulness to one of profound depression. . . . Just now, while he was reading, he was wildly excited, now he's depressed. Do you want to say anything to him?"

Marcello looked at his father, who was still whimpering pitifully, his head in his hands, and said in a cold voice, "No, I have nothing to say to him, and besides, what's the use? . . . He wouldn't understand anyhow."

"Sometimes they understand," said the professor; "they understand more than you think, they recognize people, even we doctors are taken in. . . ." He laughed. "It's not so simple."

Marcello's mother went over to the madman and said, in an affable sort of way, "Antonio, do you recognize me? . . . Here's Marcello, your son. . . . He's getting married the day after tomorrow. . . . D'you understand? He's getting married."

The madman looked up hopefully at his wife, as an injured dog looks up at his master when the latter bends down over him and asks him, in human words, what is the matter. The doctor turned toward Marcello, exclaiming, "Getting married, getting married! Why, my dear Doctor, I knew nothing about it. . . . My warmest congratulations. My most sincere good wishes."

"Thank you," said Marcello drily.

His mother, moving toward the door, said in her ingenuous way, "Poor dear, he doesn't understand. . . . If he did, he wouldn't be pleased, any more than I am."

"Please, Mother," said Marcello shortly.

"Never mind, your wife has to please *you,* not other people," she replied in a conciliating tone. She turned back towards the madman and said to him, "Good-bye, Antonio."

"The bells," whimpered the madman.

They went out into the corridor, meeting Franz as he came in carrying a glass with the soothing mixture in it. The professor closed the door and said, "It's a curious thing, Doctor, how insane people keep up with the news, how up-to-date they are . . . and how sensitive they are to everything that interests the general public. . . . Now, for instance, there's fascism, there's the Duce, and so you'll find that a very large number of them develop fixations, like your father, with regard to fascism and the Duce. . . . During the war there was an endless number of insane people who thought they were generals and who wanted to take the place of Cadorna or Diaz. . . . And more re-

cently, at the time of Nobile's flight to the North Pole, I had at least three patients who knew for certain exactly where the famous red tent was and who had invented a special apparatus for rescuing the shipwrecked men. . . . Mad people are always abreast of the times. . . . In spite of their madness they do not cease, fundamentally, to take part in public life, and madness itself is the means they use to take part in it—in their own character, of course, as good, but mad, citizens." The doctor laughed coldly, delighted with his own wit. And then, turning toward Marcello's mother, but with the obvious intention of flattering Marcello himself, he said, "But as far as the Duce goes, we're all just as mad as your husband, aren't we, Signora?—mad enough to need tying up, mad enough for treatment with the douche and the straight jacket. . . . The whole of Italy is just one big lunatic asylum, ha, ha, ha."

"In that way my son is certainly quite mad," said Marcello's mother, naïvely reinforcing the doctor's compliments, "in fact I was saying to Marcello, on our way here, that there were certain points of resemblance between him and his poor father."

Marcello hung back in order to avoid hearing what they were saying. He saw them walk away toward the far end of the corridor, then turn the corner and disappear, still chattering. He stopped; he was still holding in his hand the sheet of paper upon which his father had written his declaration of war. He hesitated, took out his wallet and put the paper into it. Then he hastened his step and rejoined his mother and the doctor on the ground floor.

"Well then, good-bye, Professor," his mother was saying. "But that poor dear man—is there really no way of curing him?"

"For the present there is nothing science can do," answered

the doctor without a hint of solemnity, as though repeating a worn-out mechanical formula.

"Good-bye, Professor," said Marcello.

"Good-bye, Doctor, and again, my warmest and sincerest good wishes."

They walked down the narrow gravel path and out into the street to the car. Alberi was there, beside the open door, cap in hand. They got in without a word and the car started. Marcello sat silent a moment and then asked his mother, "Mother, I want to ask you a question. . . . I think I can speak frankly to you, can't I?"

"What is it?" said his mother vaguely, examining her face in the little mirror of her powder-compact.

"This man that I call my father and that we've just visited—is he really my father?"

His mother started laughing. "Really," she said, "Sometimes you *are* rather strange. . . . And why shouldn't he be your father?"

"Mother . . . at that time you already had—" Marcello hesitated and then concluded "—you already had lovers. . . . Isn't it possible. . . .?"

"Oh no, it isn't possible at all," said his mother with calm cynicism. "When I first decided to be unfaithful to your father you were already two years old. . . . The funny thing about it is," she went on, "that it was precisely with this idea of your being another man's son that your father's madness began. . . . He had a fixed idea that you were not his son. . . . And d'you know what he did one day? He took a photograph of me with you as a baby—"

"And made holes through the eyes of both of us," concluded Marcello.

"Ah, so you knew that," said his mother, rather astonished. "Well, that was really the beginning of his

madness. . . . He was obsessed by the idea that you were the son of a certain man that I used to see occasionally at that time. . . . I don't need to say that it was entirely his own imagination. . . . You're *his* son, one has only to look at you. . . ."

"Surely I'm more like you than him," Marcello could not help saying.

"You're like both of us," said his mother, clinching the matter. She put her compact back in her bag, and added, "I've told you already: if there were nothing else, you've both got a fixation about politics—he like a madman, and you, thank God, like a sane person."

Marcello said nothing, but turned his face toward the window. The idea of resembling his father inspired in him an intense disgust. The reference to flesh and blood, in family relationships, had always been repellent to him as an impure, unjust definition. But the resemblance to which his mother alluded not merely disgusted, but in some obscure way frightened him. What connection existed between his father's madness and his own most secret being? He remembered the phrase he had read on the sheet of paper, "Murder and melancholy," and shuddered thoughtfully. The melancholy was already upon him, like a second skin more sensitive than his real one; and as for the murder. . . .

The car was now going through streets in the center of the town, in the false blue light of dusk. Marcello said to his mother, "I'll get out here," and he leaned forward to knock on the glass in order to warn Alberi. "Then I'll see you on your return," said his mother, giving him implicitly to understand that she would not be coming to the wedding; and he was grateful to her for her reticence. Frivolity and cynicism had at least that advantage. He got out, banged the door, and disappeared into the crowd.

PART TWO

CHAPTER EIGHT

AS SOON as the train began to move, Marcello left the window where he was standing talking to his mother-in-law—or rather, listening to her conversation—and went back into the compartment. Giulia, on the other hand, remained at the window; and from the compartment Marcello could see her in the corridor as she leaned out and waved her handkerchief with an anxious urgency that gave a certain pathos to a gesture otherwise quite ordinary. Doubtless, he thought, she would stand there waving her handkerchief as long as she thought she could catch a glimpse of her mother's figure on the platform; and, for her, the moment when she ceased to see that figure would mark in the clearest possible way her own complete and final detachment from her life as a girl—a detachment she had both feared and longed for and which, with her own departure in the train while her mother was left behind, took on a painfully concrete character. Marcello looked a moment longer at his wife as she hung out of the window, in her light-colored dress that was ruckled up, by the movement of her arm, over the well-defined forms of her figure; then he sank back on the cushions, closing his eyes.

When he opened them again his wife was no longer in the corridor and the train was already out in the open country. They were crossing an arid, treeless plain, already wrapped in twilight obscurity, beneath a green sky. Here and there the ground rose up into bald hills, and between these hills appeared wide valleys surprisingly devoid both of human habitations and of human figures. A few brick ruins, on the tops of the hills, emphasized the feeling of solitude. It was a restful landscape, thought Marcello, inviting one to reflection and fancy. And now, over the horizon at the far side of the plain, the moon had risen, round and blood-red, with a glistening white star at its right hand.

His wife had disappeared and Marcello hoped that she would not come back for a few minutes. He wanted to think, and for the last time, to feel himself alone. He went back, in memory, over the things that he had done during the last few days, and realized, as he recalled them, that they brought him a feeling of vague but profound satisfaction. This, he thought, was the only possible way in which to change one's own life and one's own personality— by action, by movement in time and in space. As usual, he was especially pleased at the things that tightened his bonds to the normal, ordinary, expected world. The wedding morning: Giulia, in her wedding dress, running joyfully from one room to another in her rustling silk; himself entering the elevator with a bunch of lilies of the valley in his gloved hand; his mother-in-law who, the moment he came in, threw herself sobbing into his arms; Giulia pulling him behind the door of a cupboard in order to kiss him at her ease; the arrival of the witnesses, two of Giulia's friends, a doctor and a lawyer, and two friends of his

own from the Ministry; leaving the house for the church, with people looking out of the windows and from the pavements, as they went away in three cars—himself and Giulia in the first, the witnesses in the second, and his mother-in-law and two female friends in the third.

A curious thing had happened during the drive. The car had stopped at a traffic signal, and suddenly there had appeared at the window a red, bearded face with a bald forehead and a prominent nose. It was a beggar; but, instead of asking for alms, he had said, in a hoarse voice, "How about giving me a bridal sugar plum, you two?" —and at the same time had thrust his hand into the car. The sudden apparition of the face at the window, the indiscreet hand stretched out toward Giulia, had irritated Marcello, who with excessive severity, had answered, "Go on, get away, we've nothing for you." At which the man, who was probably drunk, had shouted out at the top of his voice, "A curse upon you!" and had disappeared. Giulia, frightened, had clung to him, murmuring, "It'll bring us bad luck"; and he, shrugging his shoulders, had replied, "Nonsense . . . he's just a drunk." Then the car had started again and the incident had slipped almost at once from his mind.

Inside the church everything had been normal, in other words quietly solemn, ritual, ceremonious. A little crowd of relations and friends sat here and there in the front pews before the high altar, the men in dark clothes, the women in light-colored, springlike frocks. The church, very rich and ornate, was dedicated to a saint of the Counter-Reformation. Behind the high altar, beneath a canopy of gilded bronze, there was, indeed, a statue of this saint in gray marble, larger than life, gazing with eyes upturned

to heaven and palms outstretched. Behind the statue, the apse of the church was covered with frescoes in the baroque manner, lively and full of flourishes.

Giulia and he had knelt down in front of the marble balustrade, on a red velvet cushion. The witnesses stood in order behind them, two by two. The service had been a long one, for Giulia's family had insisted on giving it the greatest possible solemnity. From the very beginning, an organ up in the balcony over the entrance door had started playing and had gone on continuously, now softly snoring, now bursting forth in a triumphant clamor beneath the echoing vaults. The priest had been extremely slow—so much so that Marcello, after observing with satisfaction that the ceremony, in all its details, was exactly as he had imagined and desired, after assuring himself that he was doing just what millions of married couples had been doing for hundreds of years before him, had allowed his attention to wander and had started examining the church. It was not a beautiful church, but it was very large, and had been conceived and built, like all Jesuit churches, in order to achieve a theatrical solemnity. The enormous statue of the saint, kneeling in an ecstatic attitude beneath his canopy, was erected over an altar painted to represent marble and crowded with commonplace silver candlesticks, vases of flowers, ornamental statuettes and bronze lamps. Behind the canopy was the curve of the apse, with its frescoes by some painter of the period: vaporous, swelling clouds, such as might have figured on the curtain of an opera-house, lay across a blue sky streaked by swords of light from a hidden sun. On the clouds sat various sacred personages, painted with a few bold strokes and with more decorative sense than religious spirit. Prominent among the others and overtopping them all was the figure of the

Eternal Father, and suddenly Marcello, as he looked at that bearded, haloed face, could not help seeing in it the face of the beggar who had appeared at the window of the car asking for a sugar plum and who had then cursed him. At that moment the organ was playing loudly and with an almost menacing sternness which seemed to admit no touch of sweetness; and so it was that a resemblance that in other circumstances would have made him smile (the Eternal Father disguised as a beggar putting his head in at the window of a taxi and demanding a sugar plum) recalled to his mind, for some inexplicable reason, those Biblical verses concerning Cain which his eye had happened to fall upon when he had opened a Bible one day, a few years after the Lino affair: *What has thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground.*

And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand;

When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.

And Cain said unto the Lord, My punishment is greater than I can bear.

Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me.

And the Lord said unto him, Therefore, whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him.

These verses had seemed to him that day to have been written especially for him, cursed as he was for his in-

voluntary crime, and yet, by that same curse, made sacred and untouchable. And then, after he had read them over several times and meditated upon them, he had grown tired of thinking about them, and had forgotten them. But that morning in church, as he looked at the figure in the fresco, they had come back to him and once again they had seemed well suited to his own case. Coldly, but not without a gloomy conviction that he was thrusting the instrument of his thought into a soil fertile with analogy and significance, he had speculated, while the service continued, upon this point. If there was really such a thing as a curse, why had it been hurled against him? With this question his mind was again clouded over with the clinging melancholy that continually oppressed him—the melancholy of a man who is lost and who knows that there is nothing he can do to save himself—and he had told himself that by instinct, at any rate, if not by conscience, he knew that he was under a curse. Not because he had killed Lino but because he had sought and was still seeking to free himself from the burden of remorse, of corruption, of abnormality which that far-off misdeed had laid upon him, without having recourse to religion or the abodes of religion. But what could he do about it; he had gone on to think; he was like that and he could not change himself. There was indeed no ill will in him, only the honest acceptance of the condition to which he was born, of the world as he found it. It was a condition far removed from religion, a world in which the place of religion was taken by other things. He would have preferred, certainly, to have entrusted his life to the ancient, benevolent figures of the Christian faith, to God who was so just, to the Virgin so motherly, to Christ so merciful. But, at the very moment when he was conscious of this desire, he realized that his

own life did not belong to him and that therefore he could not entrust it to whomsoever he wished; and that he was outside religion and could not enter into it again, even in order to purify himself and become normal. Normality, as he had thought, was now elsewhere; or perhaps it was yet to come, and had to be reconstructed through painful effort, through doubt and through blood.

As if to confirm these thoughts, he had at that moment looked at the woman beside him, at the woman who in a few minutes would be his wife. Giulia was kneeling, her hands clasped together, her face and eyes turned toward the altar, carried away by her own joyful, hopeful ecstasy. And yet, at his look—as though she had been aware of it on her body like the contact of a hand—she had at once turned and smiled at him with her eyes and her mouth, with a tender, humble, grateful smile full of an almost animal-like innocence. He had smiled back at her, though less openly; and then, as though it had sprung from that smile, he had felt—perhaps for the first time since he had known her—an impulse, if not actually of love, at least of profound affection mingled with compassion and tenderness. And then it had seemed to him that his look had undressed her, had removed both her wedding dress and her most intimate garments, and that he could see her, young and fresh and healthy with her rounded breasts and belly, kneeling there naked beside him on the red velvet cushion, clasping her hands. And he was naked too; and, irrespective of any ritual consecration, they were on the point of being truly united, as animals in the woods are united; and this union, whether or not he believed in the rite in which he was taking part, would really come about, and from it, as he wished, children would be born. With this thought it had seemed to him, for the first time, that he was placing

his feet on firm ground, and he had reflected, "This woman in a short time will be my wife . . . and I shall possess her . . . and she, when she has been possessed, will conceive children . . . and this, for the present, for lack of anything better, will be my point of departure towards normality."

But at that moment he had seen Giulia moving her lips in prayer, and, as he watched that eager movement of her mouth, it had seemed to him that her nudity had suddenly been clothed again, as if by enchantment, with her wedding dress, and he had realized that, she, Giulia, believed firmly in the ritual consecration of their union; and he had not been displeased at this discovery; in fact, it had brought him a feeling almost of relief. For Giulia normality was not a thing that had to be found or reconstructed; it was there; and she was immersed in it and, whatever happened, would never forsake it.

And so, as the ceremony came to an end, there had been a sufficiency of feeling and of affection on his part. A feeling and an affection of which he had at first thought himself incapable, and that he felt to be inspired by deep impulses coming from within himself rather than suggested by the place and the marriage rite. Everything, in fact, had been carried out according to the rules of tradition, in such a way as to satisfy not only those who believed in such rules but himself also, who did not believe in them but wished to act as though he did. As he was walking out with his wife on his arm, at the moment when they stopped in the doorway at the top of the steps leading down from the church, he had heard Giulia's mother, behind him, say to a friend, "He *is* such a good, kind man. . . . You saw how deeply moved he was. . . . He loves her so much. . . . Really Giulia *couldn't* have found a better

husband." And he had been pleased at having been able to inspire so satisfactory an illusion.

As he came to the end of these reflections, he was conscious of a sort of sharp, zealous impatience to reassume his role as a husband at the point at which he had left it after the wedding ceremony. He turned his eyes away from the window, that now—since night had fallen—was full of nothing but black, faintly glittering darkness, and looked out into the corridor in search of Giulia. He was aware of a slight feeling of irritation at her absence, and this gave him pleasure, for it seemed to him a sign of naturalness with which he was now playing his part. He wondered whether he ought to possess Giulia in the inconvenient sleeping berth or wait till they arrived at S., the end of the first stage of their journey. At this thought he was aware of a sudden, strong desire, and made up his mind to possess her in the train. That was the right thing to happen in such a case, he thought; besides, he felt strongly inclined to it, both from carnal appetite and from a kind of self-satisfied loyalty to his role as a husband. Giulia, however, was a virgin (a fact he knew for certain) and to possess her would not be easy. He realized that he would be almost pleased if, after trying in vain to break her virginity, he was forced to wait for the hotel at S. and the convenience of a double bed. Such things happened to the newly wed—ridiculous though utterly normal—and he wanted to be like the most normal of the normal, even at the cost of appearing to be impotent.

He was on the point of going out into the corridor when the door opened and Giulia came in. She was in a skirt and blouse and had taken off her jacket, which she was carrying over her arm. Her comely bosom pressed

exuberantly against the white linen of her blouse, infusing into it a faint, pinkish flesh-color; her face was radiant with joyous satisfaction; only her eyes, larger, softer, more languid than usual, seemed to reveal an amorous alarm, an almost frightened excitement. Marcello noticed all these things with complacency. Giulia was indeed the bride who prepares to surrender herself for the first time. She turned a little awkwardly (she always moved a little awkwardly, he thought, but it was an attractive awkwardness, like that of a healthy, innocent animal) in order to shut the door and pull down the curtain, and then, standing in front of him, tried to hang up her jacket on a hook beside the luggage rack. But the train was going very fast, and as it crossed a switch at full speed the whole car seemed to heel over and she fell on top of him. Cunningly, she corrected her fall and sat on his knees, putting her arms round his neck. Marcello felt the full weight of her body resting on his own thin legs, and automatically he placed his arm round her waist. She said, in a low voice, "D'you love me?" and at the same time lowered her face toward his, seeking his mouth with her own. They kissed lingeringly, while the train ran on at a high speed—the accomplice, so to speak, of their kiss, since at every jolt their teeth knocked together and Giulia's nose seemed anxious to penetrate his face. At last they separated, and Giulia, without getting off his knee, conscientiously took a handkerchief from her bag and wiped his lips, saying, "You've got about half a pound of lipstick on your mouth." Marcello, stiff in the legs, took advantage of another jolt of the train to slide her heavy body away from him on to the seat. "You naughty creature," she said, "don't you want me?"

"They still have to come and make up the beds," said Marcello, rather embarrassed.

"Just fancy," she went on without any transition, looking all round her, "it's the first time I've ever traveled in a sleeping car."

Marcello could not help smiling at the simple way in which she spoke, and asked, "D'you like it?"

"Yes, I like it very much," she said, looking around again. 'When do they come to get the beds ready?"

"Soon."

They were silent; and then Marcello looked at his wife and found that she, too, was looking at him, but with a changed expression—with timidity and apprehension, almost, although the vivid, happy expression of a few minutes before still lingered in her face. She saw he was looking at her and smiled as if to excuse herself, and then, without a word, put out her hand and pressed his. From her moist and loving eyes two tears slipped down her cheeks, followed by two more. Giulia went on looking at him as she wept, trying all the time, pitifully, to smile through her tears. At last, with sudden impetuousness, she bent down and started wildly kissing his hand. Marcello was disconcerted by this weeping. Giulia was by nature cheerful and not very sentimental, and it was the first time he had seen her in tears. But she gave him no time to come to any conclusion, for she sat up and said hurriedly, "Forgive my crying like this . . . but I was thinking that you're so much better than I am and that I'm not worthy of you."

"Now you're starting to talk like your mother," said Marcello smiling.

She blew her nose and then replied calmly, "No, Mummy says these things without knowing why she says them. . . . But I have a good reason."

"What reason?"

She looked at him for some time and then explained,

"I've got to tell you something, and afterwards perhaps you won't love me any more. . . . But I've got to tell you."

"What is it?"

She answered slowly, looking at him closely as though she wanted to catch the very first sign of the scornful expression she feared. "I'm not what you think I am," she said.

"What d'you mean?"

"I'm not. . . . Well, in fact, I'm not a virgin."

Marcello looked at her and suddenly understood that the normal character which he had hitherto attributed to his wife did not, in reality, exist. He did not know what was concealed behind this incipient confession, but he knew now for certain that Giulia, according to what she herself had said, was not what he had thought. There came over him a premonitory feeling of satiety at the idea of what he was going to hear, and a desire, almost, to refuse to listen to her confidences. But the first thing to do was to reassure her; and this was easy for him, because whether that famous virginity of hers existed or not did not really matter to him in the least. He replied in an affectionate voice, "Don't worry . . . I married you because I was fond of you, not because you were a virgin."

Giulia shook her head and said: "I knew you had a modern mentality . . . and that you wouldn't make a fuss about it . . . But I had to tell you, all the same."

"A modern mentality," Marcello could not help thinking with some amusement. The phrase was like Giulia herself, and made up for the absent virginity. It was an innocent phrase, though its innocence was not quite of the kind he would have expected. Taking her hand, he said, "Come on, don't let's think about it any more," and he smiled at her.

Giulia smiled back at him. But again, while she was still

smiling, tears filled her eyes and ran down her cheeks. Marcello protested. "Come, come . . . what's the matter now? . . . I've told you I don't mind."

Giulia's response was a singular one. She threw her arms around his neck but turned away her head, holding it against his chest and looking down so that Marcello could not see her face. "I've got to tell you everything," she said.

"What d'you mean, everything?"

"Everything that happened to me."

"But it doesn't matter."

"Please let me. . . . It may be silly, but if I don't tell you I shall feel I'm hiding something from you."

"But why?" said Marcello, stroking her hair. "I suppose you had a lover . . . someone you thought you were fond of . . . or that you really were fond of. . . . Why do I have to know about it?"

"No, I wasn't fond of him," she answered at once, almost contemptuously, "and I never thought I was. . . . We were lovers more or less right up to the day when I got engaged to you. . . . But he wasn't a young man like you. . . . He was an old man of sixty—disgusting, and hard, and nasty, and exacting . . . a friend of the family—you know him."

"Who is it?"

"Fenizio, the lawyer," she said briefly.

Marcello gave a start. "But he was one of our witnesses. . . ."

"Yes, he insisted. . . . I didn't want him to be, but I couldn't refuse. . . . It was a wonder that he even allowed me to get married. . . ."

Marcello recalled that he had never cared for this lawyer Fenizio, whom he had very often met by chance at Giulia's

home; he was a small, rather fair man, bald, with gold spectacles, a pointed nose that wrinkled up when he laughed, and a lipless mouth. A man, he also recalled, who was very calm and cold but who, within that same calmness and coldness, had his own unpleasant kind of aggressiveness and petulance. He was strong, too: one hot day he had taken off his coat and rolled up his shirtsleeves, showing thick, white arms bulging with muscles. "But whatever did you see in him?" he could not help exclaiming.

"It was he who saw something in me . . .and very early, too. . . . I was his mistress, not for a month or for a year, but for six years."

Marcello made a quick mental calculation. Giulia was now twenty-one, or just over; therefore. . . . Astonished, he repeated, "Six years?"

"Yes, six years. . . . I was fifteen when . . . d'you understand?" Giulia, he noticed, although she was speaking of things which, to all appearances, still gave her pain, kept up the usual drawling, good-natured tone that she used for the most indifferent scraps of gossip. "He took advantage of me on the very day, more or less, that poor Daddy died. . . . If it wasn't the very same day, it was the same week. . . . As a matter of fact, I can tell you the exact date: just eight days after my father's funeral. . . . And remember, he was an intimate friend of my father's, and his trustee. . . ."

She paused for a moment, as if, by her silence, she wished to stress the impious behavior of the man; then she went on, "Mummy was doing nothing but weep at that time, and of course going to church a great deal. . . . He came one evening when I was alone in the flat; Mummy had gone out and the maid was in the kitchen. . . . I was sitting at the table in my room, busy doing my homework. . . . I

was preparing for my exam at that time. . . . He came in on tiptoe and went around behind me, then bent over my exercise-book and asked me what I was doing. I told him, without turning around. I hadn't the slightest suspicion, in the first place because I was quite innocent—and you can believe me when I say I was as innocent as a two-year-old child—and also because he was like a relation to me . . . I used to call him 'Uncle,' just fancy! . . . Well then, I told him I was preparing my Latin exercise, and he —d'you know what he did?—he took hold of me by my hair, with one hand, but very firmly. . . . He often did that, for a joke, because I had splendid hair, long and wavy, and he said his fingers couldn't resist it. . . .When I felt him pulling, I still thought it was a joke and said to him, 'Let me go, you're hurting . . .'—but instead of letting go, he forced me to get up and holding me at arm's length steered me toward the bed, which was in the corner near the door, as it still is . . . I—just imagine—I was so completely innocent, I still didn't understand . . . and I said to him, I remember, 'Let me go, I've got to do my exercise.' At that moment he did let go of my hair . . . but no, I can't tell you. . . ."

Marcello was on the point of asking her to continue, thinking that she was ashamed; but Giulia, who had stopped merely in order to time her effects, resumed. "Although I wasn't yet fifteen, I was already very well developed, almost like a grown-up woman. . . . I didn't want to tell you because just to speak of it still hurts me. . . . He let go of my hair and squeezed me against his chest, but so hard that I couldn't even manage to scream and I almost fainted . . . perhaps I really did faint. . . . And then, after that embrace, I don't know what happened. I was lying on the bed and he was on top of me and I had understood

everything, and all my strength had left me and I was just like an inanimate object in his hands, passive and inert and without any will power . . . and so he did just what he wanted with me. . . . Later I cried, and then, to comfort me, he told me he loved me, that he was mad about me —you know, the usual things. . . . But he also told me, in case I hadn't thoroughly understood, that I wasn't to say anything to Mummy unless I wanted him to ruin us. . . . Apparently Daddy, latterly, had made a mess of his affairs, and our material welfare now depended on *him.* . . . After that day he came back other times . . . but not regularly . . . always when I wasn't expecting him. . . . He used to come into my room on tiptoe, bend down over me and ask me in a severe voice: 'Have you done your exercise? No? . . . Well, come and do it with me, then.' And then, as usual, he would take me by my hair and conduct me at arm's length to the bed. . . I tell you, he had an absolute passion for getting hold of my hair." She laughed, almost heartily, at the memory of this habit of her former lover's, as one laughs at some characteristic, amiable quality. "And so he went on for almost a year, continuing to swear that he loved me and that, if he hadn't had a wife and children, he would have married me . . . and I'm not saying he didn't mean it. . . . But if he had really been fond of me, as he said, there was only one way for him to show it—to leave me alone. . . . Anyhow, after a year, in desperation, I made an attempt to get rid of him: I told him I didn't love him and would never love him, that I couldn't go on in that way, that I couldn't get anything done and was in a bad state and hadn't passed my exam, and that if he didn't let me alone I would have to give up my studies altogether. . . . And then he—just imagine—he went and told Mummy that he understood my character and was convinced that I

wasn't cut out for intellectual study and that, I was now sixteen, the best thing would be for me to get a job. . . . To start off with, he offered me a post as secretary in his office. . . .D'you see? . . . Of course I resisted as hard as I could, but poor darling Mummy said I was being ungrateful, that he had been, and still was, such a help to us, that I musn't miss such a fine opportunity; and so, in the end, I was forced to accept. . . . Once I was in his office and with him all day long, there was no possibility of stopping, as you may imagine . . . and so I began again, and finally he got me into the habit of it, and I gave up protesting. . . . You know how it is: I felt there was no hope for me any more and became fatalistic. . . . But when, a year ago, you told me you were fond of me, I went straight to him and said to him that, this time, the whole thing was really finished. . . . He protested, vile creature that he is, and threatened to go to you and tell you the whole story. . . . So d'you know what I did? I picked up a sharp paper cutter that lay on his desk and held the point of it to his throat, and I said, 'If you do that, I'll kill you'; and then I went on, 'He shall know about our relations, it's only right that he should. . . . But *I'm* going to be the one to tell him, not you. . . . From now on you simply don't exist for me . . . and if you make the slightest attempt to come between him and me I'll kill you. . . .I'll go to prison for it but I'll kill you.' I said this in a tone that made him realize I meant it . . . and from then on he never breathed another word—except when he tried to get back at me by writing that anonymous letter in which he spoke of your father. . . ."

"Ah, so that's who it was," Marcello could not help exclaiming.

"Of course. . . . I recognized the paper at once and typing too." She was silent for a moment, and then, in sud-

den anxiety, took Marcello's hand and added: "Now I've told you everything and I feel better. . . . But perhaps I ought not to have told you, perhaps now you won't be able to endure me any more, perhaps you'll hate me."

Marcello did not answer, but remained silent for a long time. Giulia's tale had aroused in his mind neither hatred for the man who had abused her nor pity for her, who had endured that abuse. The very manner in which she had told her story—passionless and sensible, even when she was expressing repugnance or contempt—excluded any feelings so decided as hatred or pity. And so he himself, as it were by contagion, was inclined to regard the matter in a not dissimilar light, with a mixture of indulgence and resignation. He felt, if anything, an entirely physical amazement, unconnected with any sort of criticism—like falling into an unexpected void. And, as a reaction, he was aware of a sharpening of his habitual melancholy at being confronted with this unforseen confirmation of a rule of decadence to which he had hoped, for a moment, that Giulia might be an exception. Yet his conviction of the profoundly normal character of Giulia's whole personality remained unaffected. Normality, he suddenly realized, did not consist so much in holding aloof from certain experiences as in the standard by which one judged them. Chance had willed that both he and Giulia had had something in their lives to conceal, and, consequently, to confess. But whereas he himself felt utterly incapable of speaking about Lino, Giulia, on the other hand, had not hesitated to reveal to him her relations with the lawyer, choosing, for this revelation, the moment which, according to her ideas, was most suitable—the moment of their marriage, which she felt should wipe out the past and open up for her an entirely new way of life. This thought gave him pleasure because

in spite of everything it confirmed Giulia's normality, which lay in her ability to indemnify herself by the customary, ancient methods of religion and the affections. Distracted by these reflections, he turned his eyes towards the window and did not notice how alarmed his wife was at his silence. Then he felt her trying to embrace him and heard her voice asking him, "You don't say anything? It's true, then . . . you're disgusted with me . . . The truth is that you can't bear me any more and you're disgusted at me."

Marcello wanted to reassure her, and he made a movement to take her in his arms. But he was thwarted by a violent jerk of the train, so that, without meaning to, he struck her in the face with his elbow. Giulia interpreted this involuntary blow as a gesture of rebuff and immediately rose to her feet. The train entered a tunnel with a long, mournful whistle and a thickening of the darkness at the window. Through the clatter, redoubled by the echo of the tunnel, he seemed to catch the sound of a sob from Giulia as, with arms outstretched, she swayed and stumbled towards the door of the compartment. He was surprised and, without getting up, called to her. "Giulia." Her only answer was to open the door and disappear into the corridor, still swaying and stumbling in that distressing manner.

For a moment he sat still, then suddenly alarmed, rose and followed her out. Their compartment was in the middle of the coach, and he saw his wife hurrying along the deserted corridor in the direction of the vestibule. As he saw her moving swiftly over the thick, soft carpet between the mahogany walls, the words she had spoken to her former lover flashed across his mind: "If you say anything I'll kill you!" and he thought he had perhaps been ignorant of one aspect of her character and had mistaken her good nature for sloth. At the same moment he saw her bend down and

fumble with the handle of the door. Darting forward, he seized her by the arm and pulled her back.

"What on earth are you doing, Giulia?" he asked in a low voice, through the clatter of the train. "What did you think . . .? It was the train. . . .I meant to turn round and instead I bumped into you."

She stiffened as he put his arms round her, as though she intended to struggle. But, at the quiet, sincerely surprised tone of his voice, she seemed to calm down suddenly. After a moment, bending her head, she said: "I'm sorry, perhaps I made a mistake, but I had the impression that you hated me, and so I just wanted to make an end of everything . . . It wasn't a gesture; if you hadn't arrived I should have really done it."

"But why? . . . Whatever had come into your head?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Well, to cut a long story short . . . Getting married, for me, was a far more important thing than you think . . . When I decided you couldn't bear me any more, I thought, there's nothing else to be done . . ." She shrugged her shoulders again and added, raising her face toward him with a smile, "Just think, you would have been left a widower almost before you were married."

Marcello looked at her for a moment without speaking. Evidently Giulia was sincere; it was perfectly true that she had attached a far greater importance to marriage than he had imagined possible. And he understood, then, with a feeling of astonishment, that her humble remark was an indication of her complete participation in the nuptial rite, which for her—unlike himself—had been what it truly ought to have been, neither more nor less. So it was not surprising that, after a self-surrender so impassioned, she should have thought, at the first disillusionment, of killing

herself. He told himself that this was almost a piece of blackmail on Giulia's part: either you forgive me or I shall kill myself; and once again he was conscious of relief at finding her so like what he had wished her to be. Giulia had turned away again and appeared to be gazing at the window. He put his arm round her waist and murmured in her ear, "You know I love you."

She turned at once and kissed him with a passion so impetuous that Marcello was almost frightened. That was the way, he thought, in which pious women in churches sometimes kissed crosses, or relics, or the feet of statues. The clatter of the tunnel had meanwhile died down into the usual swift, rhythmic sound of wheels in the open air; and they separated.

They stood there side by side in front of the window, hand in hand, gazing into the darkness of the night. "Look," said Giulia at last, in her normal voice, "look over there . . . What can it be? A house on fire?"

There was indeed a fire, like a shining red flower in the middle of the dark pane of glass. "I daresay it is," said Marcello, and lowered the window. As the mirror-like brightness of the glass was withdrawn from the outside darkness, the cool wind of the train's motion blew into his face, but the red flower remained, hanging mysteriously in the blackness of night, whether far or near, high or low, it was impossible to tell. Then, after staring for some time at the four or five petals of fire that seemed to be moving and throbbing, he turned his eyes to the bank beside the railway, along which the feeble lights of the train were running, together with his own and Giulia's shadows. Suddenly he was conscious of a sensation of acute bewilderment. Why was he in this train? And who was the woman standing beside him? And where was he going? And

who indeed was he? And where had he come from? He did not suffer as a result of this bewilderment; on the contrary, it was pleasing to him as a feeling already familiar which perhaps also constituted the very background of his most intimate being. "I'm just like that fire over there in the darkness," he thought coldly. "I shall flare up and then die down again without reason and without result . . . just a little piece of destruction hanging in the blackness of night."

He started at Giulia's voice informing him, "Look, they've evidently made up our beds," and he realized that, while he himself had been lost in contemplation of that distant fire, for her there remained simply the question of their love; or rather, to be more exact, the approaching union of their two bodies. She was concerned, in fact, with what she was doing at the moment and nothing else. She had already walked off, not without a kind of repressed impatience, toward their compartment and Marcello followed some distance behind her. He paused a moment in the doorway to allow the conductor to come out, and then went in. Giulia was standing in front of the mirror and, regardless of the door being still open, was taking off her blouse, unbuttoning it from the bottom to the top. Without turning round, she said to him: "You take the top berth, and I'll have the bottom one."

Marcello closed the door, climbed up into his berth and immediately started undressing, putting his clothes in the rack as he went. Naked, he sat waiting on the bed, his arms clasping his knees. He heard Giulia moving about, the tinkling sound of a tumbler in its metal holder, the thud of a shoe falling on the carpet, and other noises. Then, with a dry click, the bright electric lamps went out, leaving only the purplish glimmer of the night lamp; and Giulia's voice said, "Are you

coming?" Marcello hung his legs over the edge, twisted round, put one foot on the lower berth and bent sideways to get into it. As he did this, he saw Giulia lying naked on her back, her arms across her eyes, her legs spread out. In the dim, deceptive light her body seemed of a cold, mother-of-pearl whiteness, with dark patches at the groin and under the arms and a dull pink at the breast; and she appeared lifeless, not only because of this deathly pallor but because of her relaxed and utter stillness. But as Marcello bent over her, all at once she shook herself with a violent jerk like the spring of a closing trap and pulled him to her, throwing her arms round his neck, opening her legs and clasping her feet behind his back. Later, she thrust him harshly away and curled up against the wall, all huddled up with her forehead against her knees. And Marcello, lying beside her, understood that that which she had drawn, with such frantic passion, from his body and which she had enclosed and preserved so jealously in her own womb, no longer belonged to him, but would have its growth in her. And this, he thought, he had done in order to be able to say, once at any rate, "I have been a man like all other men . . . I have loved, I have united myself with a woman and have begotten another human being."

CHAPTER NINE

AS SOON as he thought Giulia had fallen asleep, Marcello got out of bed and started dressing. The room was full of a fresh, transparent half-light that gave a hint of the splendid brilliance of June over sky and sea. It was a typical Riviera hotel room, high, white, with blue plaster decorations in the form of flowers and stalks and leaves, light-colored wooden furniture in the same floral style as the plasterwork, and, in one corner, a big green palm. When he was dressed, he tiptoed to the window, pushed the shutters slightly apart and looked out. There was the wide, smiling expanse of the sea, made vaster by the perfect clearness of the violet-blue horizon that seemed, as a faint breeze passed over it, to be lit up, wave after wave, by a tiny sparkling flower of sunlight. Marcello lowered his eyes from the sea to the promenade. It was deserted; no one was sitting on the benches in the shade of the palm trees facing the sea, no one was walking along the gray, clean asphalt. He examined this view for some time, then closed the shutters again and turned to look at Giulia as she lay on the bed. She was naked and asleep. The position of her body as she lay on her side brought into prominence the pale, ample roundness of her hip, from which the upper part

of her body seemed to hang limp and lifeless, like the stem of a wilting plant from a vase. The back and the hips, as Marcello knew, were the only firm, solid part of that body; on the farther side of it, invisible to him now but present to his memory, was the softness of her belly, flowing over, in tender folds, on to the bed, and of her breasts, dragged down by their weight, one over the other. Her head, hidden by her shoulder, could not be seen; and Marcello, remembering that he had possessed his wife a few minutes before, had the feeling that he was looking not at a real person but at a machine made of flesh, beautiful and lovable but brutal, made for love and for nothing else. As if his pitiless stare had waked her, she suddenly stirred and sighed deeply, and then said, in a clear voice, "Marcello." He stepped quickly to her side, answering affectionately, "Here I am." She turned over, transferring from one side to the other her cumbrous weight of female flesh, lifted her arms blindly and clasped them round his hips. Then, with her hair falling over her face, she slowly, tenaciously, rubbed her nose and mouth against him, seeking his groin. She kissed him there, with a kind of humble, passionate fetishism, paused a moment, motionless, her arms still around him, then fell back on the bed, overcome with sleep, her hair covering her face. And now she was asleep again, in the same position as before, except that she had changed from her right to her left side. Marcello took his coat from its peg, tiptoed to the door and went out into the passage.

He went down the wide, echoing staircase and out through the door of the hotel on to the promenade. For a moment he was dazzled by the sunlight reflected in flashing points from the surface of the sea. He closed his eyes, and then, as though his senses had been revived by darkness, he was struck by a sharp smell of horse-urine. There was a row of three

or four cabs there, standing in a patch of shade behind the hotel, white covers on their seats, their drivers asleep on the box. Marcello went to the first of them and jumped in, calling out the address: "Via dei Glicini." He noticed that the driver threw him a quick, meaningful glance before, without speaking a word, he whipped up his horse.

The cab bowled along the sea front for some distance and then turned into a short street of villas and gardens. At the far end of the street rose the first of the Ligurian hills, luminous, vine-decked, with gray olive trees here and there. and a few tall red houses with green window-frames standing on the slope. The street led straight toward the flank of the hill; pavements and asphalt came to a sudden end, giving place to a sort of grassy track. The cab stopped and Marcello looked up. He saw, set back in a garden, a gray, three-floored house with a black-slated roof and mansard windows. The cabman said drily, "This is it," took his money and hurriedly turned his horse. Marcello thought that he was offended at having had to bring him to this place; but perhaps, he reflected pushing open the gate, he was attributing to him the repugnance that he himself felt.

He walked up the path between two dusty laurel hedges, toward a door set with panes of colored glass. He had always hated such places and had never entered one except for two or three times in his youth, coming away, each time, with a feeling of disgust and remorse, as though at something unworthy he ought not to have done. Feeling sick at heart, he went up the two or three steps, pushed open the glass door, letting loose a jingling mechanism of bells, and found himself in a Pompeian hall, facing a staircase with a wooden banister. He recognized the sickly smell of face powder, sweat and semen. The house was immersed in silence and summer afternoon torpor. As he was looking around, there appeared from

somewhere or other a sort of maidservant, dressed in black with a white apron tied round her waist. She was small and slim, and her sharp, ferret-like face was enlivened by two brilliant eyes. She came towards him with a shrill "Good-day" uttered in the gayest of tones. "I want to speak to the proprietress," he said, taking off his hat with perhaps excessive politeness. "All right, pretty boy, you shall speak to her," replied the woman, speaking in the local dialect; "but in the meantime you'd better go into the drawing room. . . The proprietress will come to you. . . Go in there." Marcello, irritated both by her familiar way of speaking to him and by the misunderstanding, nevertheless allowed himself to be pushed towards a half open door. He saw, in an uneven half-light, a long, rectangular, empty room, with a row of red-upholstered divans all round the walls. The floor was dusty, like that of a station waiting room; the worn and dirty stuff of the divans, too, suggested the dreariness of a public place within the intimacy and secrecy of a private house. Marcello, uncertain what to do, sat down on one of the divans. At the same moment—like the sudden unburdening of bowels long unmoved —he could hear through the house a sort of disintegration, a pattering sound, the precipitate rush of feet down the wooden staircase. And then the thing that he had feared happened. The door opened and the peevish voice of the maid announced, "Here are the young ladies . . . all for you."

Lazily, unwillingly they came in, some of them half-naked, some more or less dressed, two of them dark and three fair, three of middling height one decidedly small and one enormous. The latter came and sat down beside Marcello, flopping down on the divan with a sigh of exhausted satisfaction. At first he turned away his face, then, fascinated, moved slightly round again and looked at her. She was truly enormous, pyramidal in shape, her hips broader than her waist, her

waist broader than her shoulders and her shoulders broader than her head, the latter being extremely small, with a snub-nosed face and a tress of black hair twisted round her forehead. A yellow silk brassiere supported her low, swelling breasts; below her navel a red skirt hung wide open like the curtain of a theatre, displaying the dark groin and the massive white thighs. Seeing that she was being looked at, she smiled suggestively to one of her companions who was sitting against the opposite wall, heaved a sigh, and then passed her hand between her legs as though to pull them apart into a less hot position. Marcello, offended by this idle immodesty, would have liked to pull away the hand with which she was rubbing herself underneath her belly; but he had not the energy to move. The thing that struck him most in these female cattle was the irreparable quality of their degradation. It was the same thing that made him shudder with horror in face of his mother's nudity and his father's madness, and was at the source of his almost hysterical love of order, quietness, tidiness, composure. The woman turned to him and said in a benevolent, jocular tone, "Well, don't you like your harem?" . . . Have you made up your mind?"—and immediately, in an impulse of frantic disgust, he got up and ran out of the room, followed by a burst of laughter and some obscene remarks in dialect. Furious, he went toward the staircase, thinking that he would go up to the floor above and search for the proprietress, but at that moment there was another peal from the front doorbell, and when he turned he saw, standing on the threshold, the astonished and—to his eyes, in his present embarrassment—almost paternal, figure of the Secret Service agent, Orlando.

"Good day, sir, . . But where are you going, sir?" the latter exclaimed quickly, "you mustn't go upstairs."

"As a matter of fact," said Marcello, pausing and becoming

calm again immediately, "I think they mistook me for a client. . ."

"Stupid women," said Orlando, shaking his head. "Come with me, sir. . . I'll show you the way. . . You're expected, sir."

He preceded Marcello through the glass door and into the garden. One behind the other, they walked down the path between the hedges and turned round behind the house. The sun was scorching in this part of the garden, with a dry, sharp heat of dust and vegetation run wild. Marcello noticed that all the shutters of the villa were closed, just as though it were uninhabited; and the garden, too, was full of weeds and appeared to be abandoned. The Secret Service man was now making for a low, white building that took up the whole of the far end of the garden. Marcello remembered having noticed little houses like this, at the bottoms of gardens behind villas of this kind in other watering places. In summer the owners would let the villa and retire into them, restricting themselves to a couple of rooms in order to make money. Orlando opened the door without knocking and stuck his head in, announcing, "Here is Doctor Clerici."

Marcello walked forward and found himself in a small room fitted up, in a summary sort of way, as an office. The air was thick with smoke. A man was sitting at the table, his hands joined and his face turned toward him. The man was an albino. His face had the glowing, rosy transparency of alabaster, and was flecked with yellow freckles. His blue eyes, inflamed and almost red, with white lashes, were like those of certain wild animals that live among the polar snows. Accustomed as Marcello was to the disconcerting contrast between the dull bureaucratic style and the often ferocious tasks of many of his Secret Service colleagues, he could not help saying to himself that this man, at any rate, was perfectly suited

to his position. There was more than cruelty in that spectral countenance—a kind of ruthless fury, almost, that was yet kept within bounds by the conventional rigidity of his military bearing. After a moment of embarrassing immobility, the man rose brusquely to his feet, revealing the shortness of his stature. "My name is Gabrio," he said. Then he immediately sat down and went on in an ironical tone, "So here you are, at last, Doctor Clerici."

His voice was metallic and disagreeable. Marcello, without waiting to be asked, also sat down and said, "Yes, I arrived this morning."

"I did, in fact, expect you this morning."

Marcello hesitated. Should he tell him that he was on his honeymoon? He decided not to, and concluded quietly, "It wasn't possible for me to come earlier."

"So I see," said the man. He pushed the box of cigarettes toward Marcello with an ungracious "Do you smoke?" then lowered his head and started reading a sheet of paper lying on the table. "They leave me here, in this house which may be hospitable but isn't in the least secret, without information, without directives, practically without money . . . ah, here it is." He went on reading for some time, then raised his head and added, "They told you in Rome to come and see me, didn't they?"

"Yes, the same man that brought me here just now came and notified me that I was to break my journey here and come and see you."

"Yes, exactly." Gabrio took the cigarette from his mouth and put it carefully down on the edge of the ash tray. "At the last moment, it appears, they changed their minds. . . The program is altered."

Marcello did not blink an eyelid; but a wave of indefinable relief and hope rushed over him exhilaratingly. Perhaps he

would now be allowed to simplify his journey, to reduce it to its ostensible motives of Paris and a honeymoon. He said, however, in a clear voice, "What does that mean?"

"It means that the plan is modified and, consequently, your mission also," continued Gabrio. "This man Quadri was to have been watched, you were to have got in touch with him, gained his confidence, even got him to entrust you with some commission or other. . . Now in my last communication from Rome, Quadri is specified as a troublesome person, to be suppressed." Gabrio took up his cigarette again, inhaled a mouthful of smoke, and replaced it in the ash tray. "In fact," he explained, in a more conversational tone, "your mission is reduced to practically nothing. . . All you have to do is to get in touch with Quadri, availing yourself of the fact that you know him already, and then point him out to this man Orlando, who will also be going to Paris. . . You can invite him, for instance, to some public place where Orlando will also be—a café, a restaurant. . . All that's needed is for Orlando to see him with you, to make certain of his identity. . . That's all that's asked of you now. . . Then you can devote yourself to your honeymoon exactly as you like."

So Gabrio too knew about his honeymoon, thought Marcello, astonished. But this first thought, he at once realized, was nothing but a hastily assumed mask by means of which his mind sought to conceal from itself its own agitation. In reality Gabrio had revealed to him something more important than knowledge of his honeymoon—the decision to suppress Quadri. With a violent effort he forced himself to make an objective examination of this extraordinary, this lamentable piece of news. And he immediately established, in his own mind, one fundamental fact. In order to suppress Quadri, his own presence in Paris, his own co-operation, were not in any way necessary. Orlando could perfectly well find and identify

his victim by himself. The truth of the matter was, he thought, that they wanted to involve him in an effective, though unnecessary complicity, to compromise him utterly, once and for all. As for the alteration in the plan, there was not the slightest doubt but that it was merely apparent. The plan just propounded by Gabrio had of course been already decided on and worked out in all its details at the time of his visit to the Ministry; and the apparent alteration had been due to a characteristic desire to divide and confuse responsibility. Neither he nor, probably, Gabrio, had received written orders; thus, in case of unfavorable developments, the Ministry would be able to proclaim its own innocence; and the blame for the murder would fall on him, on Gabrio, on Orlando, and on the other immediate participants.

He hesitated, and then, to gain time, objected, "I can't see that Orlando has any need of me in order to find Quadri. . . I think he's actually in the telephone book."

"Those are the orders," said Gabrio with almost breathless haste, as if he had foreseen Marcello's objection.

Marcello lowered his head. He realized that he had been enticed into a kind of trap, and that, having put out one finger, he was now, through a subterfuge, caught by the whole arm; but, strangely, once the first shock of surprise was over, he found that he felt no real repugnance at the change of plan —nothing more, in fact, than an obstinate, melancholy resignation in the face of a duty which, though it increases in unpleasantness, yet remains unchanged and unavoidable. Probably the Secret Service agent Orlando had no knowledge of the inside mechanism of this duty, but he himself had— and that was all the difference between them. Neither he nor Orlando could evade what Gabrio called "orders," that were in fact personal situations that had now been firmly established, outside which, for both of them, lay nothing but dis-

order and irregularity. At last he looked up and said, "All right then. . . And where am I to find Orlando, in Paris?"

Gabrio looked down at the same sheet of paper on the table, and replied, "You tell me where you'll be staying . . . then Orlando will come and see you."

So, they did not quite trust him, and anyhow did not consider it opportune to give him the man's address in Paris. He mentioned the name of the hotel where he would be staying, and Gabrio made a note of it at the bottom of the paper. He went on, in a more affable tone, as though to indicate that the official part of the visit was over, "Have you ever been to Paris?"

"No, this is the first time."

"I was there for two years before I ended up in this hole here," said Gabrio with characteristic bureaucratic bitterness. "Once you've been in Paris even Rome seems like a village. . . And imagine a place like this!" He lit a cigarette from the butt of the other, and added, with empty boastfulness, "In Paris I was in clover. . . A flat, a car, lots of friends, affairs with women. . . As far as that goes, you know, Paris is ideal."

Marcello, though it went against the grain, felt that he ought to respond to Gabrio's affability in some way. So he said, "But with this house here, just across the way, you shouldn't be bored."

Gabrio shook his head. "Pooh, how could one think of amusing oneself with those lumps of meat fit only for conscripts, at so much a pound? . . . No," he added, "one's only resource here is the Casino. . . D'you gamble?"

"No, never."

"It's interesting, all the same," said Gabrio, pulling himself back in his chair, as though to indicate that the interview was finished. "Fortune may smile upon anyone, on you just as

much as on me. . . . It's not for nothing that she's a woman. . . The important thing is to grab hold of her when you can." He rose, went to the door and threw it open. He was indeed very small, Marcello observed, with short legs; the upper part of his body was stiffly enclosed in a green jacket of military cut. Gabrio stood there for a moment looking at Marcello, in a ray of sunlight that seemed to accentuate the transparency of his pink, glowing skin; then he said, "I don't suppose we shall meet again. . . On your return from Paris you'll be going straight back to Rome."

"Yes, almost certainly."

"Is there anything you need?" Gabrio asked, suddenly and unwillingly. "Have they provided you with funds? . . . I haven't much with me here . . . but if you need anything. . ."

"No thanks, I don't need anything."

"Well, good luck, then—and into the lion's mouth!"

They shook hands and Gabrio hastily closed the door. Marcello walked away toward the gate.

But as he was going down the path, he realized that, in his hurried flight from the drawing room, he had left his hat there. He hesitated, loth to go back into that room that stank of shoes and face powder and sweat, and fearing, besides, the jests and the flattery of the women. Then he made up his mind, turned back and pushed open the door, letting loose the usual tinkle of bells.

This time nobody appeared, neither the ferret-faced maid nor any of the girls. But, through the open door of the big room, he heard the well-known, loud, good-natured voice of Orlando; and, feeling encouraged, he looked into the room.

It was empty, except for Orlando, who was sitting in the corner by the door beside a woman whom Marcello did not remember having noticed among those who had appeared at his first entry. The Secret Service man had his arm round her

waist, in an awkward, confidential attitude, and he did not trouble to change his position at Marcello's appearance. Embarrassed, vaguely irritated, the latter turned away his eyes from Orlando and looked at the woman.

She was sitting in a rigid attitude, as though she wished in some way to repel her companion, or at least to keep him at a distance. She was dark, with a high, white forehead, bright eyes, a long, thin face and a large mouth enlivened by dark-colored lipstick and she wore a scornful expression. She was dressed in an almost normal manner, in a white evening dress, low at the neck and sleeveless, whose only meretricious device was that the skirt was split almost up to the waist so as to display her belly and her crossed legs, long, slim and elegant, with a chaste beauty like the legs of a dancer. She held a lighted cigarette between two fingers but she was not smoking: her hand rested on the arm of the sofa and the smoke rose into the air. Her other hand lay quietly on Orlando's knee. It might as well have been lying, thought Marcello, on the faithful head of a large dog. But what struck him most forcibly about her was her forehead, and not so much its whiteness as its appearance of being illumined in a mysterious way by the intense expression of the eyes, with a purity of light that made him think of one of those chaplets of diamonds that women used to wear, on great occasions, at balls. Marcello continued to gaze at her for some time in astonishment, and as he gazed he was conscious of a painful, indescribable feeling of regret and disdain. Meanwhile Orlando, intimidated by this persistent stare, had risen to his feet.

"My hat," said Marcello. The woman had remained seated, and was now, in turn, gazing at him, but without curiosity. Orlando hurried assiduously across the room to fetch the hat from a divan on the far side. And then, suddenly, Marcello understood why it was that the sight of the

woman had aroused in him that painful feeling of regret. The truth, he realized, was that he did not want her to do what Orlando desired, and seeing her submit to his embrace had made him suffer as though he were witnessing some intolerable profanation. Of course she knew nothing of the light that shone on her brow—which in any case did not belong to her any more than beauty, in general, is the property of a beautiful person. Yet he felt it almost his duty to prevent her demeaning that shining brow in order to satisfy the erotic caprices of Orlando. For one moment it occurred to him to make use of his authority in order to get her out of the room. He would engage her in conversation for a short time, and then, as soon as he could be sure that Orlando had chosen another woman, he would go away. He also had the crazy idea of carrying her away from the brothel and giving her the chance of another sort of life. But, even as he had these thoughts, he realized that they were foolish fancies. It was impossible that she should not be like her companions, like them irreparably and, as it were, innocently ruined and lost. Then he felt a touch on his arm; Orlando was in the act of handing him his hat. Automatically he took it.

But Orlando had had time to reflect on that curious stare of Marcello's. He stepped forward, and, pointing to the woman in much the same way as he might have pointed out something in the way of food or drink to an honored guest, made a suggestion to him. "If you wish, sir, if you like this woman. . . I can wait."

At first Marcello did not understand. Then he saw the smile on Orlando's face, at the same time both respectful and knowing, and felt himself blushing up to the ears. So Orlando was not retiring, he was merely yielding first place to him, from politeness as a friend as well as from discipline as an inferior—just as he might at a bar or a buffet table. Marcello

said hurriedly, "You're crazy, Orlando. . . You do just as you like, I must go."

"Very well, sir," said Orlando with a smile. Marcello saw him beckon to the woman, and to his distress saw her rise at once, obedient to the signal, and—tall, erect, the diadem of light on her brow—walk over to him without hesitation or protest, with perfect professional simplicity. Orlando said to Marcello, "We shall meet again soon, sir," and he stepped aside to allow the woman to pass. Marcello, almost in spite of himself, drew back; and she walked between them, in a leisurely way, cigarette in her fingers. But when she was in front of Marcello she stopped for an instant and said: "If you want me, my name is Luisa." Her voice, as he had feared, was coarse and harsh, without any gentleness in it; and Luisa thought it necessary to follow up her words with a gesture supposed to be flattering, putting out her tongue and licking her upper lip. Marcello felt that words and gesture relieved him, to a certain extent, of his regret at having failed to prevent her going off with Orlando. The woman, meanwhile, still leading the way, had reached the staircase. She threw her cigarette on the floor, stamped it out, and, raising her skirt with both hands, started quickly up the stairs, closely followed by Orlando. Finally they disappeared round the corner of the landing above. Somebody else—probably another of the girls and a client—was now coming downstairs. Marcello could hear their chatter. Hurriedly he left the house.

CHAPTER TEN

HAVING asked the hotel porter to get Quadri's number on the telephone, Marcello went and sat down in a corner of the lounge. It was a big hotel and the lounge was very spacious, with arches supported on pillars, groups of armchairs, showcases in which expensive objects were displayed, writing-desks and tables. Numbers of people were coming and going between the entrance and the elevator, the porter's desk and the manager's office, the door of the restaurant and the other public rooms beyond the pillars. Marcello would have liked to amuse himself, as he waited, with the spectacle of this gay, swarming lounge, but his mind, dragged down to the depths of memory by his present distress, turned back, almost against his will, to the first and only visit that he had paid to Quadri, many years before. Marcello had been a student at that time, and Quadri his tutor; and he had gone to Quadri's home in an old red building not far fom the station in Rome, to consult him about a thesis for his doctor's degree. The moment he entered, Marcello had been struck by the enormous quantity of books piled up in every corner of the flat. Even in the hall he had noticed old curtains that appeared to conceal doors. But when he pulled them aside he had discovered

rows and rows of books in recesses in the walls. The maid had led him down an extremely long and tortuous passage that seemed to go round the courtyard of the building, and the passage was lined on both sides with shelves of books and papers. When he was shown into Quadri's study, Marcello had found himself in a room whose four walls were closely packed with books, from floor to ceiling. There were more books on the desk, arranged one on top of the other in two neat piles between which the bearded face of the professor peeped out as though through a loophole.

Marcello had at once noticed that Quadri had a curiously flat, asymmetrical face, like a papier-mâché mask with red-rimmed eyes and a triangular nose to the lower part of which a beard and a pair of false mustaches have been stuck on in a summary manner. On his forehead, too, his hair, too black and with a look of dampness, gave the impression of a badly fitting wig. Between his brushlike mustache and his broomlike beard, both of them of a suspect blackness, one caught a glimpse of a very red mouth with lips of no particular shape. And Marcello had been forced to the conclusion that all this badly-distributed hair probably concealed some kind of deformity, such as a lack of chin or a frightful scar. It was a face that had nothing real or reliable about it, a face in which everything was false, a veritable mask. The professor had risen to welcome Marcello, and, in doing so, had revealed the shortness of his stature and the hump—or rather the malformation of the left shoulder—that added a certain distressing quality to his excessively gentle and affectionate manners. As he shook Marcello's hand between the piles of books, Quadri had looked at his visitor in a short-sighted way over his thick lenses, so that Marcello had had a momentary impression that he was being examined not by two, but by four eyes. He had also noticed the antiquated style of Quadri's

clothes—a sort of frock coat, black with silk facings, black striped trousers, a white shirt with starched collar and cuffs, a gold watchchain across his waistcoat. Marcello had no liking for Quadri: he knew him to be an anti-Fascist, and Quadri's anti-fascism, his unwarlike, unhealthy, unattractive appearance, his learning, his books, everything about him went to make up in Marcello's mind the conventional picture, continually pointed at in scorn by Party propaganda, of the negative, impotent intellectual. And, in addition, Quadri's extraordinary gentleness was repugnant to Marcello, who felt there must be something false about it: it seemed to him impossible that a man could be so gentle without deceitfulness and without ulterior motives.

Quadri had welcomed Marcello with his customary expressions of exaggerated affection. There were constant interjections of such phrases as "My boy," or "My dear boy," as he waved his little white hands about over the books; and he had begun by asking a quantity of questions about Marcello's family and about himself personally. When he heard that Marcello's father was shut up in a clinic for the insane, he had exclaimed, "Oh, my poor boy, I didn't know. . . What a misfortune, what a terrible misfortune! . . . And can science do nothing to restore his reason?" But he had not listened to Marcello's reply and had passed straight on to another subject. He had a throaty voice, modulated and harmonious, extremely sweet and full of anxious apprehensiveness. Marcello had discerned through this languishing yet marked anxiety—like a watermark in a transparent piece of paper—a complete indifference. Quadri, far from taking any real interest in him, perhaps did not even see him. Marcello had been struck, too, by the absence of shades of meaning or variety of tone in Quadri's conversation. He continued to speak the whole time with the same uniformly affectionate, sentimental accent,

whether he was dealing with matters that demanded this tone or with others that did not demand it at all. Quadri, at the end of his string of questions, had inquired, finally, whether Marcello was a Fascist; and, receiving an affirmative reply, had explained in an almost casual manner, without changing his tone or showing any apparent reaction, how difficult it was for him, whose anti-Fascist feelings were so well known, to continue the teaching of such subjects as philosophy and history under a regime like that of the Fascists. At this point Marcello, in embarrassment, had tried to bring the conversation round to the object of his visit. But Quadri had immediately interrupted him. "Perhaps you will wonder why in the world I am telling you all these things. . . My dear boy, I am not talking idly nor to relieve my own personal feelings. . . I would not allow myself to waste the time that you ought to be devoting to your studies. . . I am telling you these things in order to justify, in some way, the fact that I am unable to concern myself either with you or with your thesis: I am giving up teaching."

"You're giving up teaching?" Marcello had repeated in surprise.

"Yes," Quadri had confirmed, passing his hand with a habitual gesture over his mouth and mustache. "Although it is a grief, a great grief, to me, since I have devoted my whole life to you young men, I find myself forced to resign my position." After a moment, without emphasis, the professor had added with a sigh, "Yes, yes, I have made up my mind to pass from thought to action. . . The phrase, perhaps, will not seem new to you, but it reflects my situation exactly."

Marcello had with difficulty refrained from smiling. Indeed he seemed to him a comic figure, this Professor Quadri, this little man in a frock coat, hunchbacked, short sighted, bearded, peering out at him from his armchair, between his

piles of books, and declaring that he had made up his mind to pass from thought to action. There was, however, no doubt as to the meaning of his remark. Quadri, after years of passive opposition, shut up in his own thoughts and his own profession, had decided to go over to active politics, perhaps to active plotting. Marcello, seized with a sudden, vehement dislike for him, had not been able to help warning him, in a cold, menacing manner, "You're making a mistake in telling me this. . . I am a Fascist and I might report you."

But Quadri, speaking with extreme gentleness, in an intimate sort of way, had answered, "I know you're a dear, good boy, a fine, honest boy, and that you'd never do a thing like that."

"Devil take him," Marcello had thought angrily. And he had answered, with perfect sincerity, "I might certainly do it. . . That's exactly what honesty means to us Fascists—reporting people like you and making it impossible for them to do any harm."

The professor had shaken his head. "My dear boy," he had said, "you know, even while you're speaking, that what you say isn't true. . . You know it, or rather, your heart knows it. . . And in point of fact you, honest young man that you are, took the step of warning me. . . Another—you know what he would have done, a real informer?—he would have pretended to approve of what I said, and then, once I had compromised myself by some thoroughly imprudent statement, he would have reported me. . . But you warned me."

"I warned you," Marcello had replied harshly, "because I don't believe you're capable of what you call action. . . Why can't you be satisfied with being a professor? . . . What action are you talking about?"

"What action? . . . Never mind," Quadri had answered, with a sly but intent look. Marcello, at these words, could not

resist looking around at the walls, at the shelves full of books. Quadri had caught this look and, still in the gentlest possible way, had added, "it seems strange to you, doesn't it, that I should be talking of action? . . . Among all these books? . . . At this moment you're thinking, 'What sort of action is he babbling about, this little twisted, myopic, bearded hunchback?'. . . Now, truthfully, isn't that what you're thinking? . . . Your little Party newspapers have so often described to you the man who is both ignorant and incapable of taking action, the intellectual, and you can't help smiling with pity when you recognize him in me. . . Isn't that so?"

Surprised at such penetration, Marcello had exclaimed, "How did you come to guess that?"

"Oh, my dear boy," Quadri had replied, rising to his feet, "my dear boy, I guessed it at once. . . But, in order to act, it doesn't mean that you have to have a gold eagle on your cap or braid on your sleeves. . . Well, good-bye, anyhow, good-bye, good-bye and good luck. . . Good-bye." With these words, gently, implacably, he had pushed Marcello toward the door.

And now Marcello, thinking over that meeting, realized that there had been a strong element of youthful impatience and inexperience in his rash contempt for the hunchbacked, bearded, pedantic Quadri. Besides, his mistake had been proved by what had happened. Quadri, a few months after their interview, had fled to Paris and had soon become one of the principal anti-Fascist leaders—perhaps the cleverest, the most wily, the most aggressive of all. His speciality, it seemed, was proselytism. Benefiting by his teaching experience and his knowledge of the youthful mind, he was often successful in converting young men who were indifferent, or even of contrary opinions, and then urging them to bold and dangerous undertakings which were almost always disastrous,

if not to him, their inspirer, at any rate to their artless executants. He did not appear, however, as he flung these initiates into the conspiratorial struggle, to feel any of the humane anxieties that, in view of his character, one might have been tempted to expect of him. On the contrary, he sacrificed them quite coolly in desperate actions that could be justified only as part of an extremely long-term plan and that, indeed, necessarily involved a cruel indifference to the value of human life. Quadri, in fact, possessed some of the rare qualities of the true politician—or at least of a certain category of politicians; he was astute and at the same time enthusiastic, intellectual yet active, frank yet cynical, thoughtful yet imprudent. Marcello, as part of his official work, had often been concerned with Quadri, who was described in police reports as an extremely dangerous element, and he had always been struck by his capacity for combining so many contrasting qualities in one single character, profound and ambiguous as it was. And thus, gradually, from what he had managed to learn at a distance and from information that was not always exact, he had changed his former contempt for an angry respect. His original dislike, however, stood firm; for he was convinced that Quadri, among so many qualities, lacked that of courage. This seemed to be proved by the fact that, although he thrust his followers into mortal dangers, he never, personally, exposed himself.

He was aroused with a start from these thoughts by the voice of one of the hotel pages who crossed the lounge rapidly, calling out his name. For a moment, deceived by the page's French pronounciation, he almost thought it must be someone else's name. But this "Monsieur Clairici" was, of course, himself—as he realized, with a slight feeling of nausea, when, pretending to himself that he really thought it was someone else, he tried to imagine what that person was like, a person with

his face, *his* figure, *his* clothes. In the meantime the page was going away in the direction of the writing room, still calling his name. Marcello got up and went straight to the telephone booth.

He took up the receiver from the shelf and put it to his ear. A female voice, clear and slightly singsong, asked in French who was telephoning. Marcello answered, in the same language, "I'm an Italian. . . Clerici, Marcello Clerici. . . I should like to speak to Professor Quadri."

"He's very busy. . . I don't know if he can come. . . Did you say your name was Clerici?"

"Yes, Clerici."

"Wait one moment."

He heard the sound of the receiver being put down on the table, then footsteps receding, and finally there was silence. Marcello waited for some time, expecting a further sound of footsteps to announce the woman's return or the arrival of the professor. Instead of which, springing without warning from the depth of that utter silence, came the echoing voice of Quadri, "Hullo, Quadri here. . . Who's speaking?"

Marcello hastily explained: "My name is Marcello Clerici. . . . I was a student of yours, when you were teaching in Rome. . . I should like to see you."

"Clerici," repeated Quadri doubtfully. And then, after a moment, with decision, "Clerici: I don't know the name."

"Yes, you do, Professor," Marcello insisted. "I came to see you a few days before you gave up teaching. . . I wanted to discuss a subject for a thesis with you."

"One moment, Clerici," said Quadri. "Really I don't remember your name . . . but that doesn't mean you may not be right. . . And you want to see me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"For no particular reason," replied Marcello; "but, as I was your pupil and as I've heard a good deal about you recently —I just wanted to see you, that's all."

"Well," said Quadri in a more yielding tone, "come and see me here at my flat."

"When can I come?"

"Today, if you like. . . In the afternoon . . . after lunch. . . Come and have some coffee . . . about three o'clock."

"I must tell you," put in Marcello, "I'm on my honeymoon . . May I bring my wife?"

"But of course, naturally. . . Till later, then."

He rang off, and Marcello too, after a moment's reflection, replaced the receiver. Before he had had time to leave the telephone booth, the same page who had called out his name in the lounge reappeared and said, "You're wanted on the telephone."

"I've had my call already," said Marcello, starting to leave.

"No, someone else wants you."

He went back into the booth and took up the receiver again. A loud voice, good-natured and cheerful, immediately shouted into his ear, "Is that you, Doctor Clerici?"

Marcello recognized the voice of the Secret Service agent Orlando, and replied calmly, "Yes, it's me."

"Did you have a good journey, sir?"

"Yes, excellent."

"Is the Signora well?"

"Very well."

"And what d'you think of Paris?"

"I haven't been outside the hotel yet," answered Marcello, slightly annoyed with this familiarity.

"Well, you'll see. . . Paris is Paris. . . As we going to meet, sir?"

"Yes, of course, Orlando. . . You say where."

"You don't know Paris, sir . . . so I suggest a place that's easy to find. . . The café at the corner of the Place de la Madeleine. . . Don't make a mistake—on the left as you come from the Rue Royale. . . It has lots of tables outside, but I'll be waiting for you inside. . . There won't be anyone inside."

"All right . . . what time?"

"I'm at the café already. . . But I'll wait as long as you like."

"In half an hour, then."

"That's fine, sir. . . In half an hour."

Marcello left the telephone booth and walked toward the elevator. But, just as he was going in, he heard, for the third time, the same page calling out his name. This time he was really surprised. He felt a vague hope that this might be some superhuman intervention, that, as he put his ear to the black receiver of the telephone, he might hear the voice of an oracle uttering some decisive word about his life. His heart in a flutter, he turned and went back to the telephone booth.

"Is that you, Marcello?" asked the languid, caressing voice of his wife.

"Oh, it's you!" he could not help exclaiming—whether with disappointment or relief, he could not have said.

"Yes, of course it is. . . Who did you think it was?"

"It doesn't matter. . . I was expecting a telephone call. . ."

"What are you doing?" she asked, with an accent of melting tenderness.

"Nothing. . . I was just on the point of coming up to tell you I'm going out, and that I would be back in about an hour."

"No, don't come up. . . I'm just going to have a bath. . . All right then, I'll expect you in an hour's time, down in the lounge."

"It might be an hour and a half, even."

"All right, an hour and a half, then. . . But please don't be longer."

"I said that so as not to keep you waiting . . . it'll probably be an hour."

She said, hastily, as though afraid that Marcello might go away, "Do you love me?"

"Of course I do; why d'you ask me?"

"Never mind. . . If you were with me now, would you give me a kiss?"

"Certainly I would. . . D'you want me to come up?"

"No, no, don't come up . . . but tell me . . ."

"What?"

"Tell me, did you like me last night?"

"What questions you ask, Giulia!" he exclaimed, a little ashamed.

"Forgive me," she went on at once. "I don't know what I'm talking about. . . You do love me, then?"

"I've already told you I do."

"Forgive me. . . Well then, that's understood, I'll meet you in an hour and a half. . . Good-bye, my love."

This time, he thought, hanging up the receiver, he was not going to wait for any more telephone calls. He crossed the hall, and, pushing the glass and mahogany revolving door, went out into the street.

The hotel faced on the Seine. As he came out he stopped for a moment on the threshold, struck by the gay spectacle of the city and the brilliant weather. As far as the eye could reach, all along the parapet above the river, big leafy trees laden with the bright foliage of spring rose from the pavements. They were trees he did not know—horse chestnuts, perhaps. The clear sunlight shone on each leaf and was transmuted into a bright, luminous, smiling greenness. All along

the parapets stretched the stalls of the second-hand booksellers and the print-sellers. People were walking, in a leisurely manner, beside them, under the trees, in the playful variation of sun and shade, and the general atmosphere was strikingly like that of a quiet Sunday promenade. Marcello crossed the road and went and stood by the parapet, between two of the stalls. Beyond the river, on the other bank, rose the gray buildings with their mansard roofs. Further along were the two towers of Notre Dame; further still, the spires of other churches, the outlines of groups of houses and more roofs and gables. He noticed that the sky was paler and wider than in Italy, reflecting as it were, the invisible, swarming presence of the immense city lying beneath its vault. He looked down at the river: sunk between its sloping stone walls, with the clean quays along its sides. It looked, at this point, like a canal; the water, oily and sluggish, of a muddy green color, ringed the white piers of the nearest bridge with sparkling whirlpools. A black and yellow barge slipped swiftly, foamlessly, over the thick water, its funnel belching hasty puffs of smoke; in the bows two men were talking, one wearing a blue blouse, the other a white sleeveless vest. A fat, familiar sparrow perched on the parapet close beside his arm, chirped in a lively manner as if to tell him something, then flew off again in the direction of the bridge. A thin young man who might have been a student, badly dressed, with a beret on his head and a book under his arm, attracted his attention. He was going in the direction of Notre Dame, in a leisurely way, stopping every now and then to look at the books and the prints. As he watched him, Marcello was struck by his own leisureliness. In spite of all the obligations that oppressed him he might have been that young man, he thought. And then the river, the sky, the trees, the whole of Paris would have had a different meaning for him. At the same moment he saw an

empty taxi coming slowly along the street and was almost surprised to find himself signaling to it to stop: one moment earlier he had not thought of such a thing. He jumped in, giving the address of the café where Orlando was awaiting him.

Leaning back on the cushions, he looked out at the streets of Paris as the taxi carried him along. He noticed the gay look of the city—gray, old, but nevertheless smiling and graceful and full of an intelligent charm that seemed to blow in at the windows together with the breeze of the taxi's motion. He liked the *gendarmes* at the crossroads, though he could not have said why. They seemed to him elegant, with their hard, round kepis, their short cloaks, their slim legs. One of them came to the window to say something to the driver. He was an energetic-looking, pale, fair young man, and he held his whistle between his teeth, while still keeping his arm, with its white baton, stretched out behind him to hold up the traffic. He liked the big horse chestnut trees that raised their branches toward the glistening window-panes of the old gray façades. He liked the old-fashioned shop signs with their white lettering, full of flourishes, on a brown or wine-red background. He liked even the unaesthetic pattern of the taxis and buses with hoods that looked like the muzzles of dogs running along sniffing the ground. The taxi, after a short halt, passed in front of the neo-classic temple of the Chamber of Deputies, crossed the bridge, and rushed at full speed towards the obelisk in the Place de la Concorde. This, then, he thought as he looked at the immense military-looking square, enclosed at the far side by its row of arcades like regiments of soldiers drawn up on parade, this, then, was the capital of France, of that France that had to be destroyed. He felt now that he had loved this city that lay before his eyes for a long time—long before that day, when he found himself

there for the first time. And yet this admiration that he felt for the majestic, kindly, joyous beauty of the town emphasized to him the somber nature of the duty he was preparing to perform. Perhaps if Paris had been less beautiful, he thought, he might have evaded that duty, he might have escaped, have freed himself from the bonds of fate. But the beauty of the city established him firmly in his hostile, negative role—as did the many repugnant aspects of the cause he was serving. He realized, as he thought over these things, that he had found a way of explaining to himself the absurdity of his own position. And he knew that he explained it in that way because there was no other way of explaining it and so of accepting it freely and consciously.

The taxi stopped and Marcello got out in front of the café appointed by Orlando. The rows of tables on the pavement were crowded, as he had warned him they would be; but when he went inside the café, he found it deserted. Orlando was sitting at a table in a recess formed by a window. As soon as he saw him, he rose and beckoned to him.

Marcello walked across without hurrying and sat down opposite him. Through the window he could see the backs of the people sitting outside in the shade of the trees, and beyond, part of the colonnade and of the triangular pediment of the church of the Madeleine. Marcello ordered coffee. Orlando waited till the waiter had gone away, and then said, "Perhaps you're thinking, sir, that you'll get an 'espresso' coffee the same as in Italy, but you're quite wrong. . . Good coffee doesn't exist in Paris, as it does with us. . . You'll see what sort of a brew they'll bring you, sir."

Orlando spoke in his usual respectful, good-natured, quiet tone. "An honest face," thought Marcello, eyeing the Secret Service man closely while the latter, with a sigh, poured himself out some more of the despised coffee; "the face of a

bailiff or a tenant farmer or a small country landowner." He waited till Orlando had drunk his coffee and then asked, "Where do you come from, Orlando?"

"Me? From the province of Palermo, Sir."

Marcello, for no particular reason, had always thought that Orlando was a native of Central Italy, of Umbria or the Marches. Now, looking at him more closely, he saw that he had been deceived by the solid, countrified look of his figure. But his face held no trace of Umbrian mildness or of the placidity of the Marches. It was, indeed, an honest, good-natured face, but the eyes, black and with a tired look in them, had a certain feminine, almost Oriental gravity about them that did not belong to those parts of the country; nor was there mildness and placidity in the smile on the wide, lipless mouth beneath the small, ill-shaped nose. "I should never have thought it," he murmured.

"Where did you think I came from?" asked Orlando, almost eagerly.

"From Central Italy."

Orlando seemed to be reflecting for a moment; then, frankly but respectfully, he said, "You too, sir—I bet you've got the usual prejudice."

"What prejudice?"

"The prejudice of the North against South Italy and in particular against Sicily. . . You may not want to admit it, sir, but it is so." Orlando shook his head sorrowfully.

Marcello protested. "Truly I wasn't thinking about that at all. . . I thought you came from Central Italy because of your physical appearance."

But Orlando was not listening. "I'll tell you what it is: it's like water dripping," he went on emphatically, obviously pleased with the unusual expression. "In the street, in the house, everywhere, even on duty . . . colleagues of ours from

the North come and find fault even with our spaghetti. . . My answer to them is, 'In the first place you've now taken to eating spaghetti yourselves—and even more than we do'; and then I say, 'How good your polenta is!. . .'"

Marcello said nothing. In reality he was not all displeased that Orlando should be talking about things that had nothing to do with his mission. It was a way of avoiding familiarity on a terrible subject to which it was quite unsuited. All at once Orlando burst out, "Sicily—what an amount of slander there is about Sicily! . . . The Mafia, for instance . . . You know the kind of thing they say about the Mafia . . . For them, there's not a single Sicilian who's not a member of it . . . Quite apart from the fact that they know absolutely nothing about the Mafia!"

"The Mafia doesn't exist any more," said Marcello.

"Of course not, it doesn't exist any more," said Orlando, with an air of not being altogether convinced. "But, sir, if it did still exist, believe me, it would be far better, infinitely better, than the same sort of affairs in the North—the Teppisti at Milan, the Barabba at Turin . . . They're nothing but a lot of bums, people who live on women, petty thieves and bullies . . . The Mafia was at any rate a school for courage."

"Excuse me, Orlando," said Marcello coldly, "but I must ask you to explain to me exactly how the Mafia came to be a 'school for courage.'"

Orlando appeared to be disconcerted by this question, not so much because of the almost official coldness of tone in which Marcello spoke as because of the complicated nature of the subject, that did not allow of an immediate and exhaustive reply. "Well, sir," he said with a sigh, "you ask me a question which it isn't easy to answer . . . In Sicily, courage is the first quality of a man of honor, and the Mafia considers

itself an honorable society . . . How can I explain? It's difficult for anyone who hasn't been there and seen things with his own eyes to understand. Imagine, sir, some sort of place—a bar, a café, an inn, a restaurant—in which a group of men met together, men who were armed and hostile to some member of the Mafia. . . Well, what would he have done? He wouldn't have asked for police protection, he wouldn't have left the neighborhood . . . No: he would have come out of his house, dressed in his best new clothes, freshly shaved, and would have made his appearance at that place, alone and unarmed, and would have spoken only the two or three words that were needed or wanted . . . And then, what do you think? Every single person—the group of his enemies, as well as his friends, and the whole village—all had their eyes on him . . . And he knew that . . . He also knew that it was all up with him if he showed he was afraid, either by not looking people straight in the eye, or by not speaking quite calmly, or by an expression on his face that was not completely serene . . . And so his whole attention was given to facing this examination—with a resolute look in his eye, a quiet voice, measured movements, and a normal color . . . Easier said than done. You have to find yourself in that position to understand how difficult these things are. . . And that's what I mean, sir—just to give you an example—by the Mafia school for courage."

Orlando, who had become excited while he was speaking, now cast a cool, inquiring glance at Marcello's face, as much as to say, "But it's not about the Mafia that we two should be talking, if I'm not mistaken." Marcello noticed his look and glanced ostentatiously at his wrist watch. "We'd better talk about our own affairs now, Orlando," he said with authority. "I'm meeting Professor Quadri today . . . According to my instructions, I am to point out the professor

to you in such a way that you can make quite certain of his identity . . . That's my part, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I shall invite Professor Quadri to dine with me or meet me in a café this evening . . . I can't yet say where . . . But if you telephone me at the hotel about seven o'clock this evening I shall know the place . . . As for Professor Quadri, let's decide now how I'm to point him out to you . . . Let's say, for instance, that Professor Quadri will be the first person whose hand I'll shake when I come into the café or the restaurant. . . is that all right?"

"That's understood, sir."

"And now I must go," said Marcello, again looking at his watch. He put the money for the coffee on the table, then rose and went out, followed at some distance by the Secret Service man.

As they stood on the pavement, Orlando's eye scrutinized the dense traffic of the street in which two lines of cars were moving, almost at walking pace, in opposite directions, and he said, in an emphatic tone of voice, "Paris."

"It's not the first time you've been here, is it, Orlando?" Marcello asked as he searched among the other cars for an empty taxi.

"The first time?" said Orlando, with a sort of heavy vehemence. "Far from it . . . Now just have a guess, sir, at how many times I've been here."

"I really don't know."

"Twelve times," said the Secret Service man, "and this is the thirteenth."

A taxi-driver caught Marcello's eye and came and stopped in front of him. "Good-bye then, Orlando," said Marcello as he got in. "I shall expect a telephone call from you this evening." Orlando raised his hand to show that he under-

stood. Marcello got into the taxi, giving the address of the hotel.

But, as the taxi bore him along, the sound of those last words spoken by the Secret Service man, his "twelve" and "thirteen"—"twelve times in Paris and this is the thirteenth"—seemed to be prolonged in his ears and to wake far-off echoes in his memory. It was as though he had put his head into a cave and shouted, and then found that his voice came echoing back to him from unsuspected depths. Then, all of a sudden, reminded by those two numbers, he recalled that he had promised to point out Quadri by shaking hands with him and realized why it was that, instead of merely informing Orlando that Quadri was easily recognizable by the hump on his back, he had had recourse to this device. It was his remote, childish memories of the sacred story that had made him forget the professor's deformity, so much more convenient for the purpose of safe identification than a handshake. Twelve was the number of the Apostles, and he himself was the thirteenth, who, with a kiss, betrayed Christ to the soldiers who had come to the garden to arrest Him. The traditional figures of the Stations of the Cross, he had so often contemplated in churches, superimposed themselves now on the modern stage scenery of a French restaurant, with its set tables, its clients sitting at their food, himself rising and going to meet Quadri and taking his hand in his, and Orlando the Secret Service agent sitting apart and watching the pair of them. Then the figure of Judas, the thirteenth Apostle, became confused with his own, coalesced with its outlines, in fact *was* his own.

He was seized with an almost amused desire to speculate, to ponder, in face of this discovery. "Probably Judas did what he did for the same reasons that I'm doing it for," he said to himself; "and he, too, had to do it, although he did

not like doing it, because, after all, it was necessary that someone should do it . . . But why be frightened? Let's admit frankly that I have chosen the part of Judas . . . so what?"

He realized that he was, in fact, not in the least frightened. Even at the worst, he observed to himself, his customary cold melancholy coming over him, there was fundamentally nothing unpleasant about it. He went on to think—not in order to justify himself but to heighten the comparison and to recognize its limits—that Judas was, certainly, like him, but only up to a certain point. Up to the point of the handshake; or even perhaps, if you like—although he himself was not a disciple of Quadri—up to the betrayal, if understood in a widely generic sense. After that, everything was different. Judas hanged himself, or at any rate thought he could not avoid hanging himself, because the people who had suggested the betrayal and paid him for it did not then have the courage to support and justify him; but *he* would not kill himself nor give himself over to despair, because, behind him . . . he saw the crowds collected in the squares to applaud the man under whose command he served, and, implicitly, to justify him, the man who obeyed orders. His final thought was that he was receiving nothing, in the absolute sense, for what he was doing. No thirty pieces of silver for him. It was just a matter of duty, as Orlando would say. The analogy changed color and faded away, leaving behind nothing but a faint trace of proud, satisfying irony. If anything, he concluded, what mattered was that the comparison should have occurred to him, that he should have worked it out, and for a moment, found it just.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

AFTER luncheon, Giulia wanted to go back to the hotel to change her dress before they went to Quadri's. But as they got out of the elevator she put her arm around his waist and whispered, "It's not true that I wanted to change . . . I just wanted to be alone with you for a little." As he walked down the long, deserted corridor between two rows of closed doors, with that affectionate arm around his waist, Marcello could not help saying to himself that, whereas for him this honeymoon in Paris was also, and more particularly, a mission, for Giulia it was purely and simply a honeymoon. It therefore followed, he thought, that no deviation could be permitted to him from the role of bridegroom that he had accepted when he got into the train with her—even if sometimes, as was now the case, he had a feeling of anguish that was far removed from amorous excitement. But this was the normality he had so eagerly longed for—this arm around his waist, these looks, these caresses; and the thing that he was preparing to do in company with Orlando was nothing more than the blood-money paid for such normality. In the meantime they had reached their room: Giulia, without letting go of his waist, opened the door with the other hand and went in with him.

Once inside, she let go of him, turned the key in the lock and said, "Shut the shutter, will you?" Marcello went to the window and did so. As he turned he saw that Giulia, standing by the bed, was already slipping her dress over her head; and he thought he understood what she had meant when she said, "I just wanted to be alone with you for a little." In silence he went and sat down on the edge of the bed, on the opposite side of Giulia. She was now in her underclothes and stockings. With great care she placed her dress on a chair at the head of the bed, took off her shoes, and finally, with an awkward movement, lifting first one leg and then the other, lay down behind nim, flat on her back, with one arm folded at the back of her neck. For a moment she was silent, and then she said, "Marcello."

"What is it?"

"Why don't you lie down here beside me?"

Obediently Marcello bent and took off his shoes, and then lay down on the bed beside his wife. Giulia immediately moved close to him, pressing her body against his, and, full of concern, asked anxiously, "What's the matter with you?"

"With me? Nothing . . . Why?"

"I don't know, you seem so worried."

"That's an impression you often have," he answered. "You know that my normal state of mind isn't exactly thoughtless . . . but that doesn't mean that I'm worried."

She embraced him silently. Then she went on, "It wasn't true that I asked you to come here so that I could get ready . . . Nor was it true that I just wanted to be alone with you . . . It's something quite different."

This time Marcello was astonished and felt almost remorseful at having suspected her of a mere erotic craving. Looking down at her, he saw that the eyes with which she gazed up at him were filled with tears. Affectionately, yet

not without a touch of irritation, he said to her, "Now it's *my* turn to ask what's the matter with *you*."

"You're quite right," she replied. And immediately she began weeping, with silent sobs whose convulsions he could feel against his own body. Marcello waited a little, in the hope that this incomprehensible weeping would stop. But it appeared, on the other hand, to be redoubled in intensity. He asked then, staring up at the ceiling, "Won't you tell me what you're crying about?"

Giulia went on sobbing for a little and then answered, "For no reason at all . . . Because I'm a fool"; and there was already a faint note of comfort in her woebegone voice.

Marcello looked towards her and repeated, "Come on . . . tell me what you're crying about."

Giulia turned her eyes to his, and though they were still filled with tears the light of hope seemed to be reflected in them; and then she smiled faintly and put out her hand and took the handkerchief from his pocket. She wiped her eyes, blew her nose, put the handkerchief back in his pocket and then, embracing him again, whispered, "If I tell you why I was crying, you'll think I'm crazy."

"Never mind," he said, caressing her, "tell me."

"Well, it was like this," she said. "At lunch I saw you were so absent-minded—so worried-looking, even—that I thought you'd already had enough of me and were regretting you had married me . . . I thought perhaps it was because of what I told you in the train—you know, about that lawyer —and that perhaps you'd realized you'd done a stupid thing, you, with the future you have in front of you, and with your intelligence and your goodness as well, in marrying an unfortunate girl like me . . . And so, when I thought this, I also thought I'd take the first step . . . that I'd go away without saying anything to you, so as to save you an

embarrassing good-bye . . . So I decided, as soon as we go back to the hotel, to pack up and go . . . to go straight back to Italy and leave you in Paris."

"I can't believe you're being serious," said Marcello, astonished.

"Perfectly serious," she continued, smiling, and flattered by his surprise. "In fact, while we were downstairs in the hall and you went away for a moment to buy some cigarettes, I went to the head porter and asked him to engage me a berth in the Rome sleeping car for tonight . . . You see, I was quite serious."

"But you're crazy," said Marcello, raising his voice in spite of himself.

"I told you," she answered, "that you'd think I was crazy . . . But at that moment I was certain, absolutely certain, that I'd be doing the best thing for you by leaving you and going away . . . Yes, I was as certain as I am certain now," she added, pulling herself up and touching his lips lightly with hers, "that I'm giving you this kiss."

"But why were you so certain?" asked Marcello, perturbed.

"I don't know . . . never mind . . . There are some things one is certain of . . . without any particular reason."

"And then," he could not help exclaiming, as though he felt some remote twinge of regret, "why did you change your mind?"

"Why? Goodness knows! . . . Perhaps it was because you looked at me in the elevator in a certain way—or at any rate I had the impression that you looked at me in a certain way . . . But then I remembered that I'd decided to go away and that I'd engaged a sleeping berth, and so, thinking that now it was too late to turn back, I started to cry . . . "

Marcello said nothing. Giulia interpreted his silence in her own way, and asked him, "You're annoyed, aren't you?

. . . You're annoyed about the sleeping berth . . . But they'll cancel it all right . . . One only has to pay twenty per cent."

"Don't be absurd," he answered slowly, as though he were thinking deeply.

"Well then," she said, stifling an incredulous laugh in which, however, there was still a slight tremor of fear, "then you're annoyed because I didn't really go?"

"More absurdities," he replied. But this time he felt he was not being entirely sincere. So, as if to suppress any ultimate hesitation, any last regret, he added, "If you had gone away, my whole life would have collapsed." And this time it seemed to him that he had told the truth, even if in an ambiguous manner. Would it not perhaps be a good thing if his life—that life that he had built up from the starting-point of the Lino affair—did really collapse entirely, instead of overloading itself with more burdens and more obligations, like some ridiculous building to which an infatuated owner goes on adding towers and turrets and balconies till finally he endangers its solidity? He felt Giulia's arms enfold him even more closely, in an amorous embrace; and then heard her whisper, "Do you really mean that?"

"Yes," he answered, "I really mean it."

"But what would you have done," she insisted, with a sort of self-satisfied, almost conceited curiosity, "if I had really left you and gone away? . . . Would you have run after me?"

He hesitated before answering, and again he seemed to hear in his own voice an echo of that distant regret. "No, I don't think so . . . Haven't I told you already that my whole life would have collapsed?"

"Would you have stayed in France?"

"Yes, possibly."

"And what about your career? Would you have let that go to pieces?"

"Without you, it wouldn't have had any meaning," he explained calmly. "I do what I'm doing because of you."

"But what *would* you have done, then?" She seemed to be finding some cruel kind of pleasure in imagining him alone, without her.

"I should have done what they all do, the people who leave their own country and their own professions for reasons of this kind. I should have adapted myself to some sort of a job—as a scullion, or a sailor, or a chauffeur . . . or I should have enlisted in the Foreign Legion . . . But why are you so anxious to know?"

"Well . . . it's interesting . . . In the Foreign Legion . . . Under another name?"

"Probably."

"Where is the Foreign Legion stationed?"

"In Morocco, I believe . . . and in other places too."

"In Morocco . . . However, I didn't go away," she murmured, pressing herself against him with greedy, jealous violence. Silence followed these words. Giulia did not move, and Marcello, as he looked at her, saw that she had closed her eyes. She appeared to be asleep. So he, too, closed his eyes, feeling that he would like to sleep. But he could not, although he felt prostrated with a deadly weariness and languor. He was conscious of a deep and painful feeling, as of a rebellion of his whole being; and a strange simile kept recurring to his mind. He was like a wire, simply a human wire through which flowed, ceaselessly, an electric current of terrifying energy whose refusal or acceptance did not depend on him. A wire like those high-tension cables on pylons bearing the notice: "Beware: Danger."

He was simply one of these conductor-wires, and sometimes the current hummed through his body without troubling him, infusing, in fact, an increased measure of vitality into him. But at other times—as, for instance, now—seeming to be too strong, too intense; and then he longed to be, not a taut, vibrating wire, but one that had been pulled down and left to rust on a pile of rubbish in some factory yard. Why, in any case, should he have to endure this transmission of current, when so many others were not even touched by it? And again, why was there never any interruption of the current, why did it never, for one single moment, cease to flow through him? The simile diverged and branched out into questions that had no answer; and all the time his painful, aching languor increased, clouding his mind, dimming the mirror of his consciousness. At last he dozed off, and it seemed to him that sleep had in some way interrupted the current and that he was really, for once, a piece of broken-off, rusty wire thrown into a corner with other refuse. But at the same moment he felt a hand touch his arm. He jumped up into a sitting position and saw Giulia standing beside the bed, fully dressed and with her hat on. She said in a low voice, "Are you asleep? Oughtn't we to be going to Quadri's?"

Marcello raised himself with an effort and for a moment stared into the half-darkness of the room, translating her remark, in his mind, to: "Ought we not to be killing Quadri?" Then he asked, almost jokingly, "Supposing we didn't go to Quadri's? . . . Supposing, instead, we had a good sleep?"

It was an important question, he thought, looking up at Giulia; and perhaps it was still not too late to drop the whole business. He saw her looking at him doubtfully, almost as though she were displeased at his proposing to stay in the hotel now that she was all ready to go out. Then she said,

"But you've been asleep already . . . for almost an hour . . . Besides, didn't you tell me that the visit to this man Quadri was important from the point of view of your career?"

Marcello was silent for a moment; then he replied, "Yes, it's true . . . It's very important."

"Well then," she said gaily, bending down and giving him a kiss on the brow, "what are you thinking about? Come along, get up and dress yourself and don't be lazy."

"But I don't want to go," said Marcello, pretending to yawn. "I only want to sleep," he added—and this time he felt he was being sincere—"just to sleep and sleep and sleep."

"You can sleep tonight," answered Giulia lightly, going over to the mirror and looking at herself attentively. "You made an engagement, and it's too late to change the program now." She spoke, as usual, in a good-natured, sensible way; and it was surprising, thought Marcello, and at the same time in some obscure way significant, how she always said the right thing without knowing it. At that moment the telephone on the bedside table rang. Marcello, raising himself on his elbow, took off the receiver and put it to his ear. It was the head porter, to announce that he had taken the sleeping berth on the Rome train for that night.

"You must cancel it," said Marcello without hesitation; "Madame is not going after all." Giulia, turning from the mirror in which she was gazing at herself, threw him a look of shy gratitude. Marcello, putting down the receiver, said, "That's done, then . . . They'll cancel it and you won't go."

"Are you angry with me?"

"Why on earth should I be?"

He got off the bed, slipped on his shoes and went into the bathroom. As he washed and combed his hair, he wondered what Giulia, would have said if he had revealed

the truth to her about his profession and about their honeymoon. The answer, without any doubt, seemed to him to be that, not merely would she not condemn him but would even in the long run approve of what he was doing, though she might be frightened and might go so far as to ask him whether it was really necessary for him to do it. Giulia was good—there could be no doubt of that— but not beyond the sacred limits of family affection. Beyond those limits there began, for her, a vague, confused world in which it might easily come about that a hunchbacked, bearded professor could be murdered for political reasons. And the wife of Orlando the Secret Service agent, he said to himself as he came out of the bathroom, must argue and feel in exactly the same way. Giulia, who was sitting waiting on the bed, rose to her feet saying, "Are you bored because I wouldn't let you sleep? Would you really have preferred not to go to Quadri's?"

"On the contrary, you did perfectly right," answered Marcello, preceding her into the corridor. He felt reinvigorated now, and there seemed to be nothing left in him of that sensation of rebellion against his own fate. The current of energy still flowed through his body, but without pain or difficulty, as though through a natural channel. Outside the hotel, he stood looking across the river at the gray outline of the immense city above the parapet, beneath the vast clear sky. Before him were the rows of stalls with their second-hand books, and the strollers moved slowly along, stopping to examine them. He even seemed to see again the poorly dressed young man with the book under his arm, walking slowly along the pavement beside the bookstalls in the direction of Notre Dame. Or perhaps it was another one, similar to him in his way of dressing and in his demeanor —and in his destiny as well. But he seemed to regard him

without envy, though with a settled, frozen feeling of powerlessness. He was himself, and the young man was the young man, and there was nothing to be done about it. He hailed a passing taxi and gave Quadri's address as he got in behind Giulia.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE moment Marcello entered Quadri's flat he was struck by the difference between it and that other apartment in which he had gone to see him for the first and last time, in Rome. The building, situated in a modern quarter at the end of a narrow, winding street resembled, with its many rectangular balconies jutting out from its smooth façade, a chest-of-drawers with all the drawers open; and it gave him the feeling of an obvious, anonymous way of life, governed by a kind of social mimicry—as though Quadri, when he established himself in Paris, had striven to identify himself as closely as possible with the general mass of the comfortably off French middle class. And then, inside, the difference had been further accentuated: Quadri's Roman abode had been old and dark, encumbered with furniture and books and papers, dusty, neglected. This, on the other hand, was bright and new and clean, with little furniture and no signs of scholarship. They waited a few minutes in the drawing room, a spacious, bare room with nothing but a group of armchairs, all in one corner, around a glass-topped table. The only detail in less ordinary taste was a large picture hanging on one of the walls, the work of a Cubist

painter—a cold but decorative combination of spheres, cubes, cylinders and parallels in various colors. Of books, of those books with which, in Rome, Marcello had been so much struck, there was not one. He felt, as he looked round at the wax-polished wooden floor, at the long, pale curtains, at the empty walls, that he was on the stage of a modern theatre, in the middle of a neat, elegant setting designed for a play with few characters and only one situation. What was the play? His own and Quadri's, no doubt; but whereas the situation was already known to him, he felt, he did not know why, that all the characters had not yet revealed themselves. Someone was still missing, and it might be that the intervention of that person would completely alter the situation itself.

As if to confirm this vague presentiment, the door at the far end of the drawing room opened and there entered not Quadri but a young woman, the same probably who had spoken to him in French on the telephone. She walked across the shining floor, tall and singularly supple and graceful in her way of walking, in a white summer dress with a bell-shaped skirt. For a moment Marcello could not refrain from looking, with a kind of furtive pleasure, at the outline of her figure visible through the transparency of her frock—a dim outline but with precise contours, elegant as that of a gymnast or a dancer. Then he looked up at her face and was certain that he had seen it before, though he could not determine where nor when. She went up to Giulia, took both her hands in hers with an almost affectionate familiarity and explained, in correct Italian but with a strong French accent, that the professor was engaged but would come in a few minutes' time. Less cordially, it seemed to Marcello, in fact somewhat hastily, she greeted him from a distance; then she invited them to sit down.

While she talked with Giulia, Marcello studied her carefully, curious to account for the vague memory that had led him to suppose he had already met her. She was tall, with rather large hands and feet, broad shoulders, and a waist of incredible slimness emphasized by her big bosom and ample hips. Her long, slender neck supported a pale face, innocent of make-up, which, though youthful, was not fresh in color but rather worn-looking, with a vigorous, anxious, restless, active expression.

Where had he seen her before? As though she felt herself being examined, she turned suddenly toward him; and then, from the contrast between the restless intensity of her gaze and the luminous serenity of her high, white forehead, he all at once knew where he had met her before, or rather, where he had met a person who resembled her—in the brothel at S., when, coming back into the big room to fetch his hat, he had found Orlando with the prostitute Luisa. The resemblance was entirely in the special shape, whiteness, and luminosity of the forehead. In this woman too, it was like a royal diadem. In other ways the two women differed considerably. The prostitute had a wide, thin mouth; this one's mouth was small, fleshy, tight-lipped —comparable, he thought, to a small rose with thick, slightly faded petals. Another difference was that the prostitute's hand was feminine, smooth, sensual; whereas this woman's hand was almost like the hand of a man—hard, reddish and nervous. And finally the prostitute had a horrible raucous voice such as is frequently found among women of her profession; while this woman's voice, on the contrary, was thin, clear, impersonal, with the agreeable quality of reasoned and subtle music—the voice of a society woman.

Marcello noted these likenesses and these differences; and then, while the woman was carrying on a conversation with

his wife, he noted also the extreme coldness of her attitude toward himself. Perhaps, he thought, she had been told by Quadri of his former political feelings, and would have preferred not to receive him. He wondered, too, who she could be. Quadri, as far as he remembered, was not married. She might, from her business-like manner, be a secretary, or, if not that, an admirer acting as a secretary. He thought again of his feeling in the house at S., when he had seen the prostitute Luisa going upstairs with Orlando—a feeling of impotent revolt, of tortured pity; and he realized that it had in reality been nothing more than sensual desire disguised as spiritual jealousy. And now this feeling was coming over him again, complete and without any disguise, for the woman who was sitting opposite him. She attracted him, in a new and upsetting manner; and he wanted to attract her; and the hostility that was visible in every one of her movements pained him bitterly. Finally he said, almost in spite of himself, thinking not of Quadri but of her, "I have an impression that our visit isn't altogether welcome to the Professor . . . Perhaps he's too busy."

She answered quickly, without looking at him, "Not at all, my husband told me he was very pleased to see you . . . He remembered you perfectly . . . Anyone who comes from Italy is welcome here . . . It's true, he is very busy—but your visit is particularly agreeable to him . . . Wait a moment, I'll go and see if he's coming." These words were uttered with an unexpected eagerness that warmed Marcello's heart. When she had gone out, Giulia asked, without, however, showing any curiosity, "Why d'you think Professor Quadri isn't pleased to see you?"

Marcello answered calmly, "It was this lady's hostile attitude that made me think so."

"How strange," exclaimed Giulia, "she gave me quite

the opposite impression . . . She seemed to me to be so pleased to see us—just as if we knew each other already . . . But had you met her before?"

"No," he replied, with the feeling that he was lying, "never before today . . . I don't even know who she is."

"Isn't she the Professor's wife?"

"I don't know, I didn't think Quadri was married . . . Perhaps she's his secretary."

"But she called him 'my husband'," exclaimed Giulia in surprise; "didn't you hear? . . . She used those words—'my husband' . . . What were you thinking about?"

And so, Marcello reflected, she had disturbed him to the point of making him not merely absent-minded, but actually deaf. This discovery gave him pleasure, and for a moment, strangely enough, he wanted to talk about it to Giulia, just as though she were not a person concerned but some outsider in whom he could confide freely. "I wasn't listening," he said. "His wife? He must have got married recently, then."

"Why?"

"Because when I knew him he was a bachelor."

"But didn't you and Quadri write to each other?"

"No. He was my tutor at the University; then he came to live in France and today I shall be seeing him for the first time since then."

"How odd, I thought you were friends."

A long silence followed. Then the door, at which Marcello was gazing without impatience, opened, and on the threshold appeared someone whom, at first, he did not recognize as Quadri. Then his eyes traveled from the man's face to his shoulder, saw once more the deformity that raised the shoulder almost up to the ear, and realized that Quadri had merely shaved off his beard. He saw again, also, the

curious, almost hexagonal shape of his face, its one-dimensional quality like that of a flat, painted mask surmounted by a black wig. He recalled, too, the eyes, staring, brilliant, red-rimmed; the triangular nose, like the clapper of a bell; the shapeless mouth, a circle of red, living flesh. The only new thing was the chin, which formerly had been hidden by the beard. It was small and crooked, curving sharply back beneath the lower lip, and of an ugliness that seemed full of meaning and possibly adumbrated some characteristic of its owner.

Instead of the frock coat in which Marcello had seen him on the first and last occasion on which he had met him, Quadri was now wearing—with the hunchback's love for light colors—a dove-gray sport coat. Beneath it he had on an American cowboy shirt with red and green checks, and a showy tie. Coming forward toward Marcello, he said, in a cordial, and at the same time utterly indifferent tone, "Clerici, isn't it? . . . Of course, I remember you perfectly well . . . particularly because you were the last student who came to see me before I left Italy . . . I'm very pleased to see you again, Clerici."

Even his voice, thought Marcello, had remained the same —extremely sweet and at the same time casual, affectionate and yet vague. Meanwhile he was introducing his wife to Quadri, who, with a gallantry that was perhaps ostentatious, stooped to kiss the hand that Giulia held out to him. When they had sat down, Marcello said, in some embarrassment, "I'm here in Paris on my honeymoon, and so I thought I would look you up . . . since you were my tutor . . . But perhaps I've disturbed you."

"No, no, my dear boy," answered Quadri with his usual melting sweetness; "on the contrary, it gives me the greatest pleasure . . . It was extremely nice of you to remember me

. . . Anyone who comes from Italy—if only because he talks to me in the lovely Italian language—is welcome here." He took a cigarette box from the table, looked inside it, and seeing that there was only one cigarette in it, offered it, with a sigh, to Giulia. "Take it, Signora," he said. "I don't smoke, nor does my wife, and so we always forget that other people like to . . . Well, do you like Paris? . . . I suppose it's not the first time you've been here?"

So Quadri wants to make conventional conversation, thought Marcello. He answered for Giulia, "Yes, it *is* the first time, for us both."

"In that case," said Quadri eagerly, "I envy you . . . Anyone who arrives for the first time in this very beautiful city is to be envied . . . and on a honeymoon, in the bargain, and at this season, which is the best of all in Paris!" He sighed again and politely asked Giulia, "And what impression do you have of Paris, Signora?"

"Me?" said Giulia, looking not at Quadri but at her husband. "Really I haven't had time to see it yet . . . We only arrived yesterday."

"You'll see, Signora, it's a very beautiful, really an exquisitely beautiful, city," said Quadri in a general sort of way, as though he were thinking of something else. "And the longer one lives in it the more completely is one conquered by its beauty . . . But, Signora, you mustn't only look at the monuments, which are, no doubt, notable, but in no way superior to those of these cities of Italy . . . You must go about, you must get your husband to take you to the different quarters of Paris . . . The life of this city has a variety of aspects that is truly surprising."

"We haven't seen much yet," said Giulia, who did not appear to appreciate the conventional, almost ironical quality of Quadri's remarks. And then, turning to her husband, she

put out her hand and touched his, caressingly, saying, "But we *will* have a good look around, won't we, Marcello?"

"Of course we will," said Marcello.

"What you must do," went on Quadri, still in the same tone of voice, "is, especially, to get to know the French people . . . They're a charming people . . . intelligent, independent . . . and—although this partly contradicts the accepted idea of the French—good, as well . . . That fine, sensitive intelligence of theirs has become a kind of goodness . . . Do you know anyone in Paris?"

"We don't know anybody," replied Marcello, "besides, I'm afraid it won't be possible . . . We're only staying a week."

"A pity, that's really a pity . . . One can't appreciate a country at its true value without knowing its inhabitants . . ."

"Paris is the place for night life, isn't it?" asked Giulia, who seemed to find herself perfectly at ease in this guidebook conversation. "We haven't seen anything of it yet . . . but we want to . . . There are plenty of dance halls and night clubs, aren't there?"

"Ah yes, the *tabarins,* the *boîtes*—'boxes,' as they call them here," said the professor in an absent-minded way. "Montmartre, Montparnasse . . . We ourselves, to tell you the truth, have never gone in much for that kind of thing . . . Sometimes, when an Italian friend has been passing through, we've taken advantage of his ignorance of such matters to learn about them ourselves . . . However they're always the same . . . though it's all done with the grace and elegance that are natural to this city . . . But you know, Signora, the French people are by nature serious, very serious . . . and with pronounced family habits . . . Perhaps you'll be surprised when I tell you that the great majority of Parisians have never set foot in a *boîte* . . . The family, here, is very important, even more so than in Italy . . . And they're

often good Catholics too . . . more so than in Italy, with a less formal, more solid devotion . . . And so it's not surprising that they leave the *boîtes* to us foreigners . . . It's an excellent source of revenue, anyhow . . . Paris owes a good part of its prosperity to the *boîtes* and, in general, to its night life."

"How strange," said Giulia, "I always thought that French people themselves went in a great deal for night life." She blushed and added, "I've been told that the *tabarins* stay open all night and that they're always full . . . as it used to be, once, with us, in carnival time."

"Yes," said the professor vaguely, "but the people who go there are mostly foreigners."

"That doesn't matter," said Giulia, "I should love to see one of them, at least . . . if only to say I'd been there."

The door opened and Signora Quadri came in carrying a tray with a coffee pot and cups. "Excuse me," she said gaily, closing the door with her foot, "but French maids are not like Italian ones . . . Today is my maid's day out and she went off immediately after lunch . . . We have to do everything ourselves." She was really gay, thought Marcello —and in a quite unforeseen manner. There was a great charm in her gaiety and in the movements of her tall figure, with its lightness and its air of self possession.

"Lina," said the professor, puzzled, "Signora Clerici wants to see a *boîte* . . . Where can we recommend her to go?"

"Oh, there are so many, there's no lack of choice," she answered brightly as she poured out the coffee, supporting her whole weight on one leg while she stretched the other out sideways as if to display her large foot in its heelless shoe; "there are *boîtes* for all tastes and all purses." She handed a cup to Giulia and then added carelessly: "But Edmondo, why shouldn't *we* take them to a *boîte* . . . It would

be a good opportunity for you to have a little distraction."

Her husband passed his hand across his chin as if he wanted to stroke his beard, and answered, "Certainly, of course, why not?"

"D'you know what we'll do?" she went on as she handed cups of coffee to Marcello and her husband, "as we've got to dine out in any case, let's all dine together. There's a little restaurant on the right bank, which isn't expensive but which is very good. It's called *Le Coq au Vin.* Then, after dinner, we'll go and have a look at a very curious place . . . But Signora Clerici mustn't be shocked."

Giulia, delighted with her gaiety, laughed and said, "I'm not so easily shocked."

"It's a *boîte* called *La Cravate Noire,* the Black Tie," she explained, sitting down on the sofa beside Giulia, "and it's a place where people of rather a special type go," she added, looking at Giulia and smiling.

"How d'you mean?"

"Women with special tastes . . . You'll see . . . The woman who runs it and the waitresses all wear dinner jackets and black ties . . . You'll see how amusing they look."

"Ah, now I understand," said Giulia in some confusion. "But can men go there too?"

This question made the other woman laugh. "Why, of course . . . It's a public place . . . just a small dance club, run by a woman of special tastes—highly intelligent, incidentally—but anyone can go there who wants to . . . It's not exactly a convent. . . ." She gave little short laughs as she looked at Giulia, then added vivaciously, "But if you don't like the idea we can go somewhere else . . . but it won't be so original."

"No," said Giulia, "let's go there . . . It intrigues me."

"Unhappy creatures," said the professor, in a general way.

He rose to his feet. "My dear Clerici, I must tell you that it has given me great pleasure to see you, and it'll give me even greater pleasure to dine this evening with your wife and yourself . . . We'll have a good talk . . . Have you still the same feelings and ideas that you used to have?"

Marcello replied calmly, "I have nothing to do with politics . . . "

"So much the better, so much the better." The professor took his hand and pressed it between both of his, adding, "Then perhaps we can hope to make a conquest of you." He spoke in a sweet, melting heartbroken tone of voice, like a priest talking to an atheist. He brought his hand up to his chest, toward his heart, and Marcello saw with astonishment that the look he gave him was dimmed and at the same time rendered more imploring by a glitter of tears in the big, round, prominent eyes. Then, as if to conceal his emotion, Quadri went over and took a hurried leave of Giulia, saying as he went out: "My wife will make arrangements with you about this evening."

The door closed, and Marcello, slightly embarrassed, sat down in an armchair facing the sofa on which were the two women. Now that Quadri had gone, the wife's hostility seemed quite obvious. She ostentatiously ignored Marcello's presence and spoke only to Giulia, "And have you seen the fashion shops, the dressmakers, the *modistes?* . . . The Rue de la Paix, the Faubourg Saint Honoré, the Avenue de Matignon?"

"To tell the truth," said Giulia, with the air of hearing these names for the first time, "to tell the truth, I haven't."

"Would you like to have a look at these streets, to go into a few shops and visit one or two dressmakers? . . . I assure you it's most interesting," continued Signora Quadri with persistent, insinuating, enfolding, protective affability.

"Oh yes, I'm sure it is." Giulia looked at her husband and then went on, "And I should like to buy something . . . a hat, for instance."

"Would you like me to take you?" proposed the other woman, at last reaching the point of all these questions. "I know some of the dressmakers' shops very well . . . I might even be able to give you some advice."

"Would you really?" said Giulia, with somewhat hesitating gratitude.

"Shall we go today, this afternoon, in about an hour's time? You don't mind, do you, if I carry off your wife for an hour or two?" These last words were addressed to Marcello, but in a brisk, almost contemptuous tone, very different from the one used towards Giulia.

Marcello gave a start and replied, "Of course not . . . if Giulia likes . . . "

He felt that his wife would have preferred to escape from Signora Quadri's guardianship—at least, judging by the questioning glance she threw him; but he found himself answering her with a glance that ordered her to accept. Immediately afterward he wondered: do I do this because this woman attracts me and I want to see her again? Or do I do it because I am on a mission and it doesn't suit me to displease her? It suddenly seemed acutely distressing not to know whether he was doing things because he liked to do them or because they suited his plans. Meanwhile Giulia was objecting, "Really I had thought of going back to the hotel for a little—"

But the other woman did not give her time to finish. "You want to freshen up a little before we go out? To have a wash, and a rest? . . . But there's no need to go back to the hotel . . . If you like, you can rest here, on my bed . . . I know how tiring it is, when one's traveling, to go about all

day long without a moment's pause, especially for us women . . . Come along, come with me, my dear." Before Giulia could draw a breath she had made her rise from the sofa, and was pushing her gently but firmly toward the door. In the doorway, as though to reassure her, she said in a bitter-sweet tone, "Your husband can wait for you here . . . Don't be afraid, you won't lose him," and then, putting her arm round Giulia's waist, she drew her into the passage and shut the door.

Left alone, Marcello jumped to his feet and took a few paces about the room. It appeared to him quite clear that this woman cherished a feeling of rooted aversion for him, and he would have liked to know the reason. But at this point his own feelings became confused. On the one hand he was distressed by the hostility of such a person, a person whom he wanted to like him; and on the other hand he was troubled by the idea that she might know the truth about him, because if that were so his mission became not merely difficult but dangerous. But the thing that caused him the greatest distress was the feeling that these two quite different anxieties were merged together and that he was no longer capable of distinguishing them from each other—the anxiety of the lover who sees himself rejected, and that of the secret agent who fears he has been discovered. In any case, he realized with a gush of his old melancholy, even if he succeeded in dissipating the woman's hostility, he would then be once again forced to place any relationship that might follow at the service of his mission. Just as when he had made the proposal, at the Ministry, to combine his honeymoon with his political function. Just as always happened.

The door opened behind him and Signora Quadri came back into the room. She went to the table, took a cigarette,

lit it and then said, "Your wife was very tired and I think she's gone to sleep on my bed . . . We'll go out together later on."

"This means," Marcello said calmly, "that you want to get rid of me."

"Oh, my goodness, no," she answered in a cold, worldly voice, "but I have a great deal to do . . . and so has the Professor. . . . You'd be left all alone here in this room . . . There are better things for you to be doing in Paris than that."

"Forgive me," said Marcello, putting his two hands on the back of an armchair and looking at her, "but it seems to me that you're hostile to me . . . Isn't that so?"

She answered at once, without fear or hesitation. "Does it surprise you?"

"Yes, really it does," said Marcello. "We don't know each other at all and this is the first time we've met . . ."

"I know you perfectly well," she interrupted him, "even if you don't know me."

"Now we're in for it," thought Marcello. He was conscious that her hostility—confirmed, now, without the slightest doubt—aroused in his heart a feeling of pain so sharp that it almost made him cry out. He sighed, deeply distressed, and said in a low voice, "Ah, you know me then?"

"Yes," she replied, her eyes sparkling with an aggressive light, "I know you're a police official, a spy paid by your government . . . Are you surprised now that I am hostile to you? . . . I don't know about other people, but I've never been able to bear *mouchards*—spies," she added, translating the French word with insulting politeness.

Marcello lowered his eyes, and for a moment was silent. His suffering was acute, and the woman's contempt was like a subtle instrument pitilessly probing an open wound. At last he said, "And does your husband know this?"

"Of course he does," she answered with insulting surprise; "how could you imagine that he doesn't? It was he who told me."

"Ah, so they're well informed," Marcello could not help thinking. He went on, in a reasonable tone of voice, "Then why did you let us come here? Wouldn't it have been simpler to refuse to receive us?"

"Personally, I should have preferred not to," she said, but my husband is different . . . My husband is a kind of saint . . . He still thinks that kindness is the best policy."

"A very cunning kind of saint," Marcello would have liked to reply. But it occurred to him that that was how it was: the saints must all have been very cunning people; so he refrained. Then he went on, "I'm sorry you're so hostile to me . . . because . . . I find you very attractive."

"Thank you, that doesn't interest me."

Later, Marcello asked himself what could have happened to him at that moment: it was as though a dazzling ray had darted from her luminous brow; and at the same time there had surged up in him a deep, violent, powerful impulse, a mixture of excitement and despairing love. He realized all at once that he was close to Signora Quadri, that he was throwing his arm around her waist, pulling her to him, saying in a low voice, "And also because I like you very much."

Pressed against him so tightly that Marcello could feel her tender, swelling breast throbbing against his, she looked at him for a moment in dumb amazement. "Ah, that's perfect!" she cried, in a strident, triumphant voice, "that's perfect! . . . actually on your honeymoon and yet you're ready to betray your wife . . . perfect!" She writhed furiously to free herself from Marcello's arm, and went on, "Leave me alone . . . or I'll call my husband." Marcello immediately let go of her; but she, carried away by an impulse of hostility, turned back

toward him and—just as if he were still holding her—slapped him across the cheek.

She seemed at once to regret what she had done. She went to the window, looked out for a moment and then, turning round, said brusquely, "I'm sorry." But Marcello felt that she was not so much sorry as frightened at the effect the blow might produce. There was, he thought, more calculation and good intention than regret in the grudging and still ungracious tone of her voice. He said, in a decisive manner, "Now there really *is* nothing for me to do but go away . . . Will you be so kind as to tell my wife and ask her to come here? . . . And you must make our excuses to your husband for this evening . . . You must tell him I had forgotten I had another engagement." That was the end of everything, he thought; and his mission, as well as his love for this woman, was wrecked.

He drew back to make way for her to pass to the door. But instead she stood staring at him for a moment, then twisted her mouth into a grimace of capricious displeasure and came toward him. Marcello noticed that a dark, determined fire burned in her eye. When she was only one pace away from him, she slowly raised her arm, and, from a distance, lifted her hand to Marcello's cheek. "No," she said, "don't go away . . . I like you too, very much . . . If I was violent, it was just exactly because I do like you . . . Don't go away . . . forget what happened." In the meantime she was slowly stroking his cheek, round and round, with an awkward but self-assured movement that was full of imperious determination, as if she wished to take away the sting of her recent blow.

Marcello looked at her, looked at her forehead, and beneath her gaze, under the slightly rough contact of her masculine hand, was aware, to his astonishment—for it was

the first time in his life that he had felt it—of a profound excitement and agitation, full of affection and of hope, pervading his breast, harassing his breathing. She was standing in front of him, stroking him with outstretched hand, and he in one look had a full consciousness of her beauty as of something that had always been destined for him, as of his whole life's vocation; and he knew that he had always loved her, even before that day, even before he had had that presentiment of her in the woman at S. Yes, he thought, this was the feeling of love that he ought to have cherished for Giulia—if he had loved her; and that he experienced, instead, for this woman whom he did not know. He moved toward her, his arms outstretched as if to embrace her. But she disengaged herself quickly, though in a manner which seemed to him affectionate and understanding; and putting a finger to her lips, murmured, "Go away now . . . we'll meet this evening." Before Marcello realized what was happening, she had urged him out of the room and into the hall and had opened the door. Then the door closed and he found himself alone on the landing.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LINA AND GIULIA were to take a rest and then go out and visit the dress shops. Then Giulia would come back to the hotel, and later the Quadris would come and fetch them and they would all have dinner together. It was now about four o'clock, and there were still more than four hours before dinner; but only three till the moment at which Orlando would be telephoning to the hotel to find out the address of the restaurant. Marcello therefore had three hours to himself. What had occurred at the Quadris' had made him long for solitude, if only in order to try and understand himself better. He thought as he went downstairs that Lina's behavior, with a husband so much older than herself and completely absorbed in politics, was not surprising, his own, on the other hand, a few days after his wedding and while actually on his honeymoon, both astonished and frightened and, in a vague way, flattered him. Hitherto he had believed he knew himself pretty well and was therefore able to control himself whenever he wished to. But he now realized—whether with more alarm or complacency, he did not know—that he had been mistaken.

He walked for some time through a series of small streets

and then at last came out into a wide, gently sloping avenue, the Avenue de la Grande Armée, as he read on the corner of a house. And there indeed, when he raised his eyes, unexpected, enormous, rose the the great rectangular shape of the Arc de Triomphe, seen sideways at the top of the street. Massive yet almost spectral, it appeared in the blue haze of summer to be hanging in the pale sky. As he walked, his eyes fixed on the triumphal pile, Marcello was suddenly conscious of a feeling that was new to him, an intoxicating feeling of freedom and independence. It was as though some great weight that was oppressing him had been unexpectedly removed, so that his step was lighter and he seemed almost to be flying. He wondered for a moment whether he ought to attribute this powerful sense of relief to the simple fact of being in Paris, away from his usual constraints and in front of this grandiloquent monument. One sometimes mistook passing sensations of physical well-being for profound movements of the spirit. Then, thinking over it again, he realized that this sensation was, in fact, due to Lina's caress. He knew this from the flood of tumultuous, disturbing thoughts that rushed up to the surface of his mind at the memory of that caress. Automatically he passed his hand over his cheek, where the palm of her hand had rested: and he could not help closing his eyes in sheer delight; relishing again the contact of the rough, fearless hand that had moved all round his face as if it wished, affectionately, to explore its contours.

What indeed was love, he wondered, walking up the broad pavement with his eyes fixed on the Arc de Triomphe, what was this love for which, as he realized, he was now perhaps on the point of shattering his whole life, deserting the wife he had just married, betraying his political faith, hurling himself into the confusion of an adventure from which there

was no turning back? He recalled that he had once, many years ago, been asked that question by a girl who was a fellow-student at the University, a girl who had obstinately rejected his wooing; and he had replied, contemptuously, that for him love was a cow standing in the middle of a field, in springtime, and a bull rising on its hind legs to get at her.

That meadow, he now thought, was the middle-class carpet on the floor of the Quadris' drawing-room; and Lina was the cow and he the bull. Naked—in spite of the difference of place and their nonanimal limbs—they would be exactly like two beasts. And the rage of desire, vented with awkward, urgent, violence, would be the same too. But here the resemblance—so obvious yet at the same time of so little importance—ceased. For, by a mysterious spiritual alchemy, this rage of desire soon became transformed into thoughts and feelings far removed from it; and these thoughts and feelings, though they received from it the impress of necessity, could not in any way be traced to it alone. Desire, in reality, was no more than nature's decisive, powerful aid to something that existed before her and without her. It was the hand of nature, drawing from the womb of the future the child—the human, moral child—of things to come.

"To be perfectly frank," he said to himself, in an attempt to moderate and calm the extraordinary exaltation that had taken possession of his spirit, "to be perfectly frank, what I want to do is to abandon my wife during our honeymoon, to desert my post during my mission, in order to become Lina's lover and live with her in Paris. To be perfectly frank," he continued, "I shall certainly do these things if I find that Lina loves me as I love her, for the same reasons and with the same intensity."

If any doubt remained as to the seriousness of his decision, it disappeared entirely when, having reached the end of the

Avenue de la Grande Armée, he raised his eyes to the Arc de Triomphe. Now, indeed, the sight of this monument raised to celebrate the victories of a glorious tyranny reminded him, by analogy, of that other tyranny he himself had hitherto served and was preparing to betray, and he felt a regret for it. Now that it was lightened and made almost innocent by the foretaste of that betrayal, the part he had been playing till that same morning seemed more comprehensible and therefore more acceptable. No longer, as hitherto, did it appear to be the fruit of a purely external wish for normality, for compensation, but to be almost a vocation, or, to say the least, an inclination that was not wholly artificial. Besides, this feeling of regret, detached and already retrospective as it was, was in fact a sure indication of the irrevocable nature of his decision.

He waited for some time for a pause in the merry-go-round of vehicles encircling the monument, and then, crossing the wide street, went straight to the Arch itself and walked, hat in hand, under its vault, where lies the tomb of the Unknown Soldier. There, on the walls of the Arch, were the lists of battles won, each of which had signified, for numberless men, a loyalty and self-sacrifice of the kind that he himself had been bound by, to his own government, until a few minutes ago; and there was the tomb and the perennial flame keeping watch over it, symbol of other sacrifices no less complete. As he read the names of the Napoleonic battles he could not help remembering Orlando's phrase: "All for Family and Fatherland"; and he suddenly understood that the thing that distinguished him from the Secret Service man—who was so convinced and at the same time so powerless to justify his conviction by rational means—was simply his capacity to make a choice, a capacity kept in strict control by the melancholy that had pursued him from time immemorial. Yes, he

thought, he had made choices in the past, and now he was again preparing to make a choice. And that melancholy of his was, in fact, a melancholy mixed with regret, such as is aroused by the thought of things that might have been, of things that the act of making a choice compels one to renounce. He came out from under the Arch, waited again for a pause in the traffic, and then went across to the pavement of the Avenue des Champs Elysées. The Arch spread an invisible shadow over the rich, festive street that sloped down from its foot; and there seemed to be some indisputable link between the warlike monument and the gay, peaceful prosperity of the crowd that thronged the pavements. Then it occurred to him that this too was an aspect of the thing that he was renouncing—a bloodstained, unrighteous greatness that changed later into a gaiety and an opulence ignorant of their origins, a gory sacrifice that became, in time, for later generations, power, freedom and ease. So many arguments in favor of Judas, he thought jestingly.

But his decision was now taken and he had only one desire left—to think about Lina, and why and how he loved her. His mind filled with this longing, he walked slowly down the Avenue des Champs Elysées, stopping now and then to look at the shops, at the newspapers in the kiosks, at the people sitting in the cafés, at the cinema posters and theatre notices. The thick crowd on the pavement pressed closely round him on every side with a pullulating movement that seemed to him to be that of life itself. Four lines of vehicles, two in each direction, going up and down the wide street, passed by him on the right; on his left luxurious shops and gay posters alternated with swarming cafés. As he walked he gradually hastened his step, as though he were anxious to leave behind the Arc de Triomphe, which now, as he saw when he turned to look at it, had become remote and insubstantial again

owing to distance and the summer haze. When he reached the bottom of the street he looked for a bench in the gardens, in the shade of the trees, and sat down on it with relief, glad to devote himself in peace to the thought of Lina.

He wanted to go back in memory to the first time he had been made aware of her existence—to his visit to the brothel at S. Why was it that the woman of whom he had caught a glimpse in the big room beside Orlando had aroused in him a feeling so novel and so violent? He recalled that he had been struck by the luminous quality in her forehead, and realized that the thing that had attracted him first in her and had then been brought to perfection in Lina was the purity that he had divined in both of them, in the prostitute, degraded and profaned, in Lina, triumphant. He understood now that the horror of decadence, of corruption, of impurity that had pursued him all his life and that his marriage to Giulia had not mitigated, could be dispelled only by the radiant light that encircled Lina's brow. He felt that the coincidence of the two names—Lino who had first aroused that horror in him and Lina who was setting him free from it—was an auspicious sign. In this way, naturally, spontaneously, by the force of love alone, he was finding, through Lina, the normality he had dreamed of. But this was not the rather bureaucratic type of normality that he had been pursuing all these years; it was a different normality, of an almost angelic kind. In face of this luminous, ethereal normality the burdensome trappings of his political obligations, of his marriage with Giulia, of his dull, rational life as a man of order, were revealed as nothing but a cumbersome image set up by him in unconscious expectation of a worthier destiny. Now he was setting himself free and finding himself again through those same processes of reasoning that had caused him, in spite of himself to adopt that expedient.

As he sat on the bench with these thoughts occupying his mind, his eye fell on a large motorcar coming down toward the Place de la Concorde and gradually reducing speed; and it did in fact come to a stop beside the pavement, quite close to him. It was an old, black car, but of an expensive make, and its antiquated shape seemed to be emphasized by the almost excessive brightness and spotlessness of its nickel and brass-work. A Rolls Royce, he thought; and all at once he was assailed by a feeling of frightened apprehension, mixed, he did not know why, with a horrifying sense of familiarity. Where and when had he seen that motorcar? The chauffeur, a thin, pock-marked man in a dark blue uniform, got out quickly, as soon as the car stopped, and ran to open the door, and then, at that movement, there sprang into Marcello's memory a picture that gave him an answer to his question: the same car, of the same color and the same make, standing at the street corner in the avenue near the school, and Lino putting out his hand to open the door for him to get in beside him. In the meantime, while the chauffeur stood, cap in hand, beside the door, a male leg in a gray flannel trouser, ending in a foot with a yellow shoe as bright and spotless as the brass-work of the car, cautiously protruded itself; then the chauffeur put out his hand and the complete person became visible to Marcello as he descended laboriously on to the pavement. He was quite an old man, Marcello judged; thin and very tall, with a bright red face and hair which might still be fair; he limped as he walked, leaning on a rubber-tipped stick. And yet he was singularly youthful-looking. Marcello observed him carefully as he slowly came towards the bench, and wondered whence the old man derived that air of youthfulness. Then he understood: it was from the fashion in which his hair was arranged, with the parting at one side, and from the green bowtie he wore with a gay pink and white striped shirt.

The old man walked with his eyes on the ground, but when he reached the bench he raised them and Marcello saw that they were blue and clear, with a look that was both hard and ingenuous, and that they too were youthful-looking. At last he sat down, with an effort, beside Marcello, and the chauffeur, who had followed close behind him, immediately handed him a small parcel done up in white paper. Then, with a slight bow, he went back to the car and got into it, sitting quietly in his own place, behind the windshield.

Marcello, who had been following the old man's movements, now sat with downcast eyes, deep in thought. He wished he had not experienced such a sensation of horror at the mere sight of a car like Lino's; that was already enough to make him feel disturbed. But the thing that frightened him most was the sharp, confused, bitter sense of subjection, of impotence, of enslavement that accompanied his disgust. It was as though there had never been that interval of years, or worse, as though those years had been spent in vain; as though he were still the boy he had then been and Lino were waiting for him in the car and he were preparing to get into it, in obedience to the man's invitation. He seemed to be once more undergoing the old blackmail, only this time it was not Lino who was applying it, with a revolver as bait, but his own flesh, with its disturbing memories. Alarmed by this sudden, agitating flare-up of a fire that he had believed to be spent, he sighed and automatically fumbled in his pockets for some cigarettes. Immediately a voice said to him in French, "Cigarettes? . . . Here are some."

He turned and saw that the old man was holding out to him in his slightly shaking red hand, an untouched pack of American cigarettes. And all the time he was looking at him with a singular expression, at once kind and commanding. Marcello, highly embarrassed, took the pack without

thanking him, opened it hurriedly, took out a cigarette and handed back the pack to the old man. The latter, seizing it and thrusting it with an authoritative hand into the pocket of Marcello's coat, said, in a suggestive tone of voice, "They're for you . . . you can keep them."

Marcello felt himself blush and then grow pale with some unaccountable mixture of anger and shame. His eyes, luckily, happened to fall on his own shoes, white with dust and out of shape from much walking. It dawned upon him then that the old man probably mistook him to be down-and-out or unemployed; and his anger evaporated. Quietly and unostentatiously he took the pack out of his pocket and put it on the bench between them.

But the old man did not notice this act of restitution, for he was no longer paying any attention to him. Marcello watched him open the little parcel that the chauffeur had handed to him and take out a roll. He broke it up slowly and laboriously, with his trembling hands, and threw two or three crumbs on the ground. From one of the leafy trees that overhung the bench a big, well-fed, familiar sparrow flew down. It hopped to the bread, twisted its head two or three times to look around, then seized a crumb in its beak and started devouring it. The old man threw down three or four more crumbs, and more sparrows flew down from the branches on to the pavement. With his cigarette between his lips and his eyes half closed, Marcello watched the scene. The old man, although he was bent and his hands trembled, had in truth kept something of the adolescent about him; or, to be more exact, no great effort was required to imagine him as an adolescent. Seen in profile, his red, capricious mouth, his large, straight nose, his fair hair with its almost urchin-like curl on the brow, made one think that he must have indeed been an extremely pretty youth—perhaps one of those Nordic

athletes who combine the grace of a girl with the strength of a man. Bending forward, his head thoughtfully inclined on his breast, he crumbled up the whole of the roll for the sparrows; then, without moving or turning round, asked, still speaking in French, "What country d'you come from?"

"I'm Italian," Marcello replied briefly.

"Why on earth didn't I think of that?" exclaimed the old man, striking himself hard on the forehead, with a characteristic whimsical vivacity. "I was just wondering where I could have seen a face like yours—so very perfect. . . How silly of me, in Italy, of course. . . And what's your name?"

"Marcello Clerici," answered Marcello after a moment's hesitation.

"Marcello," repeated the old man, raising his head and looking straight in front of him. A long silence followed. The old man appeared to be meditating; or rather, Marcello thought, he appeared to be making an effort to remember something. At last, with an air of triumph, he turned towards Marcello and recited, *"Heu miserande puer, si qua fata aspera rumpas, tu Marcellus eris."*

They were lines that Marcello knew well, from having translated them at school, and also because they had drawn jests from his schoolfellows. But spoken at that moment, after the offer of the cigarettes, these famous lines gave him an unpleasant feeling of clumsy flattery. This feeling changed to irritation when the old man looked him over from head to foot, as though summing him up, and then said, "Virgil."

"Yes, Virgil," he repeated drily; "and you, what country do *you* come from?"

"I'm British," said the old man, falling strangely into a courtly, perhaps ironically intended, Italian. Then, even more strangely, mingling Neapolitan dialect with his Italian, he went

on, "I lived for many years in Naples. . . Are you a Neapolitan?"

"No," said Marcello, disconcerted by his familiar mode of address.

The sparrows, having eaten up the crumbs, had now all flown away; at a little distance the Rolls Royce stood waiting by the pavement. The old man took hold of his stick and rose painfully to his feet, saying to Marcello in a commanding tone, this time in French, "Would you kindly go with me to my car? Do you mind giving me your arm?"

Automatically Marcello held out his arm. The cigarettes had remained on the bench, in the place where he had put them. "You're forgetting the cigarettes," said the old man, pointing to them with his stick. Marcello pretended not to hear, and started off toward the car. The old man did not insist further, but moved off with him.

He walked slowly—far more slowly than when he had walked by himself a short time before; and he leaned his hand on Marcello's arm. But his hand did not remain still; it moved up and down the young man's arm, caressing it in a frankly possessive manner. Marcello felt his heart fail him, and looking up, he understood why. He saw the car standing there waiting for them, and knew he would be asked to get in, just as had happened so many years before. But what frightened him most was the knowledge that he would not be able to refuse. With Lino there had been—apart from his longing for the revolver—a kind of unconscious coquetry; with this man, he realized to his astonishment, he was conscious of a feeling of subjection that was due to memories of the past, the subjection of someone who has once given away to an obscure temptation and who, many years later, is caught by surprise in the same trap and finds no reason for resistance.

It was just as though Lino had done what he wanted with him, he thought; just as though he had not, in reality, resisted Lino and had not killed him. These thoughts went through his mind with immense rapidity; they were more like flashes of light than thoughts. Then he looked up and saw that they had reached the car. The chauffeur had got out and was waiting, cap in hand, beside the open door.

The old man, without letting go of his arm, said, "Well, will you get in?"

Marcello, pleased at his own firmness, answered immediately, "Thank you, but I must go back to my hotel. . . My wife is waiting for me."

"Poor thing," said the old man, with malicious familiarity, "let her wait a bit. . . It'll do her good."

So there had to be an explanation, thought Marcello. "I think there's been a misunderstanding," he said. He hesitated, then, out of the tail of his eye, caught sight of a young loafer who had stopped near the bench on which the package of cigarettes was still lying. "I'm not what you think," he added; "perhaps *he* might do for you"; and he indicated the young man who, at that moment, was swiftly and furtively pocketing the cigarettes. The old man looked too, smiled, and answered with characteristic, humorous effrontery, "I can have as many of *those* as I want."

"I'm sorry," said Marcello coldly, having recovered his self-possession; and he was on the point of walking away.

But the old man detained him. "At least let me give you a lift," he said.

Marcello hesitated, looked at his watch. "All right then . . . if it gives you any pleasure."

"It gives me great pleasure."

They got into the car, Marcello first and then the old man.

The chauffeur closed the door and jumped quickly into his own seat. "Where to?" asked the old man.

Marcello said the name of his hotel, and the old man turned to the chauffeur and said something in English. The car started.

It was a silent, well-sprung car, Marcello observed, as it moved quietly and swiftly beneath the trees of the Tuileries towards the Place de la Concorde. The interior was lined with gray felt; and a glass flower vase of old-fashioned shape, fixed near the door, held a few gardenias. After a moment's silence, the old man turned to Marcello and said, "I'm sorry about those cigarettes. . . I took you for a poor man."

"It doesn't matter," replied Marcello.

The old man was silent for a short time and then went on. "It's rarely I make a mistake. . . I could have sworn that you. . . I was so sure of it that I was almost ashamed of making use of the pretext of the cigarettes. . . I was convinced that a look would be enough."

He spoke with gay, cynical, well-mannered coolness; and it was clear that he still considered Marcello to be an invert. The tone of complicity in which he spoke was so assured that Marcello was almost tempted to satisfy him by answering, "Yes, you're right, perhaps I am . . . without knowing it, in spite of myself . . . and the proof of it is my agreeing to get into your car." Instead, he replied drily, "You made a mistake—that's all."

"Yes, I see."

The car was now going round the obelisk in the Place de la Concorde. Then it stopped abruptly opposite the bridge. The old man said, "D'you know what made me think so?"

"What?"

"Your eyes . . . they're so gentle, so caressing in spite of

trying to look angry. . . They give you away."

Marcello said nothing. The car, after a brief pause, went on over the bridge, but instead of turning along the river made its way into the streets behind the Chambre des Députés. Marcello gave a start and turned toward the old man. "But my hotel is on the river."

"We're going to my house," said the old man, "won't you come and have a drink? You can stay a short time and then go back to your wife."

All at once Marcello seemed to feel again that same sense of humiliation and impotent rage that he had felt, many years before, when his schoolfellows had tied a petticoat round him and teased him by shouting "Marcellina." Like his schoolfellows, this old man did not believe in his virility; like his schoolfellows he insisted on considering him as a kind of female. He said, with clenched teeth, "Kindly take me to the hotel."

"But really! . . . What's the matter? . . . It's only for a moment."

"I got into the car simply because I was late and it was convenient that you should give me a lift. . . Now take me to the hotel."

"How strange! I thought that what you wanted was to be carried off. . . You're all like that, you like a little bit of violence."

"I assure you, you make a mistake in adopting that tone with me. . . I'm not at all what you think I am. . . I've told you so already, and I repeat it."

"How suspicious you are! . . . I don't think anything. . . Now please, don't look at me like that."

"You've asked for it," said Marcello; and he put his hand into the inside pocket of his jacket. On leaving Rome, he had taken with him a small revolver; and, in order not to arouse

Giulia's suspicions, he kept it about him all the time, instead of leaving it in his suitcase. He now pulled the weapon out of his pocket and pointed it discreetly, in such a way that the chauffeur could not see it, at the old man's coat. The latter considered him with an air of affectionate irony, then lowered his eyes. Marcello saw him become suddenly serious, with a puzzled, almost uncomprehending look on his face. "D'you see?" he said. "And now tell your chauffeur to drive me to the hotel."

The old man at once took the speaking tube and shouted the name of Marcello's hotel. The car slowed down and turned off into a side street. Marcello put the revolver back in his pocket and said, "That's better."

The old man said nothing. He appeared to have recovered from his surprise and was now looking closely at Marcello, as though studying his face. The car came out on the riverside and moved along beside the parapet. Marcello recognized the entrance of his hotel, with its revolving doors under the glass porch. The car stopped.

"Allow me to offer you this flower," said the old man, taking a gardenia from the vase and holding it out to him. Marcella hesitated and the old man added, "For your wife."

Marcello took the flower, thanked him and jumped out of the car, while the chauffeur stood bare-headed beside the open door. He thought he heard—or it may have been an hallucination—the voice of the old man taking leave of him, "Good-bye, Marcello," in Italian. He did not turn around, but, holding the gardenia tightly between his two fingers, entered the hotel.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HE WENT to the porter's office and asked for the key of his room. "It's upstairs," said the porter after looking at the board. "Madame has taken it. . . She went upstairs with a lady."

"With a lady?"

"Yes."

He was excited, and he was also immensely happy, after his encounter with the old man, to find himself so excited by the mere news that Lina was in their room with Giulia. He went to the elevator. As he entered he looked at his wristwatch and saw that it was only six o'clock. He had plenty of time to carry off Lina on some pretext or other, to take her quietly into one of the public rooms of the hotel and there decide about the future. Immediately after that he would get rid, once and for all, of Orlando, who was to telephone at seven o'clock. These contingencies seemed to him auspicious. As he went up in the elevator he looked at the gardenia that he was still holding in his fingers and was suddenly sure that the old man had given it to him not for Giulia, but for his true wife, Lina. It was now for him to hand it on to her as a pledge of their love.

He hurried along the corridor to his room and went in with-

out knocking. It was a large room with a double bed, and it had a little vestibule that communicated also with the bathroom. Marcello pushed the door to, without making any noise, and paused a moment in the darkness of the vestibule. Then he noticed that the bedroom door was ajar, showing a crack of light; and a desire came over him to spy on Lina without being seen, as though by so doing he might ascertain whether she truly loved him. He put his eye to the crack and looked into the room.

A lamp was lit on the bed table. The rest of the room was in shadow. Sitting at the head of the bed with her back against the pillows, he could see Giulia all wrapped up in a white cloth: it was the big towel from the bathroom. She was holding the bath towel to her breast with both hands, but seemed either unable or unwilling to prevent its falling wide open at the bottom, so that her belly and her legs were visible. Crouching on the floor at Giulia's feet, her full white skirt making a circle about her, embracing Giulia's legs with both arms so that her forehead was against her knees and her breast against her shins, Marcella saw Lina. Without reproving her —in fact, to all appearances, with a kind of amused, indulgent curiosity—Giulia was stretching her neck in order to observe the other woman, whom, owing to her own half-recumbent position, she could see only imperfectly. At last, without moving, Lina said in a low voice, "You don't mind my staying like this for a little?"

"No, but soon I must get dressed."

After a moment's silence Lina went on, as though resuming an earlier conversation, "How silly you are, though. . . What would it matter to you? . . . Why, you yourself said that if you weren't married you'd have nothing against it."

"Perhaps I said that," Giulia replied almost coquettishly, "so as not to offend you. . . Besides, I *am* married."

Marcello, watching, saw that Lina, while she was speaking, had taken one arm from around Giulia's legs and was moving her hand slowly, tenaciously upward along her thigh, pushing back the edge of the towel as it went. "Married!" she said, with intense sarcasm, and without interrupting her slow approach, "and who to, my God!"

"I like him," said Giulia. Lina's hand, hesitating, insinuating as the head of a snake, now moved from Giulia's hip to her naked groin. But Giulia took hold of it by the wrist and guided it firmly downward again, adding in an indulgent tone, like a governess scolding a restless child, "Don't imagine that I don't see you."

Lina took Giulia's hand and began slowly, thoughtfully kissing it, now and then rubbing her whole face violently against the palm, like a dog. "Little silly!" she breathed, with intense tenderness.

A long silence followed. The concentrated passion that emanated from every one of Lina's movements contrasted in a singular manner with Giulia's vagueness and indifference. The latter no longer appeared to be even curious; and though she abandoned her hand to Lina's kisses and rubbings, she was looking around the room as if searching for some excuse. At last she withdrew her hand and started to get up, saying, "Now I really must get dressed."

Lina leaped nimbly to her feet, exclaiming, "Don't move. . . Just tell me where the things are. . . I'll dress you."

Standing there, with her back to the door, she hid Giulia completely. Marcello heard his wife's voice say with a laugh, "You want to be my maid too, do you?"

"Why should you mind? . . . It doesn't make any difference to you . . . and it gives me so much pleasure."

"No, I'll dress myself." Out of Lina's fully-dressed figure, as though by duplication, issued Giulia, completely naked.

She passed on tiptoe in front of Marcello's eyes and disappeared at the far end of the room. Then he heard her voice saying, "Please don't look at me . . . turn the other way. . . You make me feel embarrassed."

"Embarrassed with me? . . . But I'm a woman, too."

"Yes, in a sort of way you're a woman . . . but you look at me as if you were a man."

"Well, you might as well say frankly that you'd rather I went away."

"No, stay, but don't look at me."

"I'm not looking at you . . . you silly, why d'you think I should want to look at you?"

"Don't get angry. . . What I mean is that, if you hadn't spoken to me in that way before, I shouldn't now be embarrassed and you could look at me as much as you liked." This was said in a half-stifled voice which seemed to come from inside a dress that she was slipping over her head.

"Don't you want me to help you?"

"Oh my goodness, if you really want to so much. . ."

Determined yet lacking assurance in her movements, hesitating though aggressive, filled with fervor and at the same time humiliated, Lina moved forward, was outlined for a moment in front of Marcello, and then disappeared in the direction of that part of the room whence Giulia's voice came. There was a moment's silence and then Giulia, in an impatient but not hostile tone, exclaimed, "Ugh, how tiresome you are!" Lina said nothing. The light of the lamp fell on the empty bed, showing up the hollow place left by Giulia's hips in the damp towel. Marcello left the crack in the door and went back into the corridor.

By the time he had taken a few steps he realized that his surprise and agitation had led him, quite unconsciously, to perform a significant act: automatically he had crushed be-

tween his fingers the gardenia given him by the old man and destined by him for Lina. He dropped the flower on the carpet and made his way to the staircase.

He went down to the ground floor and out into the street, in the deceptive, hazy dimness of twilight. The lamps were already lit—white clusters on distant bridges, yellow lamps in pairs on vehicles, the red rectangles of windows; and night was rising like a somber cloud of smoke to the clear green sky from behind the black outline of roofs and spires on the opposite bank of the river. Marcello went over to the parapet and leaned his elbows on it, looking down at the darkened Seine whirling along in its black flood strings of jewels and circlets of diamonds. The feeling he was now experiencing was nearer to the deathly quiet that follows disaster than to the tumult of disaster itself. He knew that, for a few hours during that afternoon, he had believed in love; now he realized that he was revolving in a topsy-turvy, sterile world in which real love did not occur, but merely sensual relationships, from the most natural and ordinary to the most abnormal and unusual. Certainly the feeling that Lino had had for him had not been love: no more was Lina's feeling for Giulia. Love did not enter into his own relations with his wife; and perhaps even Giulia, indulgent as she was, and tempted, almost, as she had been, by Lina's advances, did not love him with a real love. In this obscure and reeling world, like a stormy twilight, these ambiguous figures of men-women and women-men whose ambiguity, when they met, was mingled and redoubled, seemed to hint at some meaning which in itself was also ambiguous, but which was bound up, nevertheless—so it appeared to him —with his own destiny and with impossibility, already proved, of escaping it. Since there was no love, and simply because of that, he would continue to be what he had hitherto been, would carry his mission to completion, would persist in his in-

tention to create a family with Giulia—Giulia the animal, Giulia the unforeseeable. This was normality, this makeshift, this empty form. Outside it, all was confusion and caprice.

He felt himself driven to act in this way owing, also, to the light now thrown on Lina's behavior. She despised him, and probably hated him too, as she had declared she did when she was still being sincere; but in order not to sever their relationship and so preclude the possibility of seeing Giulia, to whom she had been attracted, she had contrived to simulate a feeling of love for him. Marcello realized now that from her, henceforward, he could expect neither understanding nor pity; and in face of this final, irremediable hostility, armored, as it was, with sexual abnormality, with political aversion and with moral contempt, he had a feeling of acute and helpless pain. And so that light in her eyes and on her brow, that light, so pure, so intelligent, that had fascinated him, would never be directed on him, to illuminate and soothe him with its affection. Lina would always prefer to humiliate and degrade it in flattery, in entreaty, in hellish embraces. He recalled, at this point, how when he saw her press her face against Giulia's knees, he had been smitten with the same sense of profanation that he had felt in the house at S., when he saw the prostitute Luisa submitting to the embrace of Orlando. Giulia was not Orlando, he thought; but he had desired that that brow should not be humbled before anyone; and he had been disappointed.

As he stood there thinking, night had fallen. Marcello straightened himself up and turned toward the hotel. He was just in time to catch sight of the white figure of Lina coming out of the door and hurrying to a car parked by the pavement. He was struck by her contented and almost furtive air, like that of a weasel or a stoat slinking away from a hen coop with its prey in its mouth. It was not the attitude of one who had been repulsed, he thought; quite the opposite. Perhaps Lina

had managed to extract some promise from Giulia; or perhaps Giulia, out of weariness or sensual passivity, had gone so far as to permit some caress or other, valueless to herself, indulgent as she was both to herself and to others, but very precious to Lina. In the meantime Lina had opened the door of the car and had got into it, sitting down sideways and then pulling in her legs. Marcello saw her go past, holding high, in profile, her beautiful, proud, delicate face, her hands on the wheel. The car vanished in the distance and he went back into the hotel.

He went up to their room and entered without knocking. The room was all in order, and Giulia was sitting, fully dressed in front of the dressing table, finishing her hair. Without turning she asked quietly, "Is that you?"

"Yes, it's me," answered Marcello, sitting down on the bed.

He waited a moment and then asked, "Did you enjoy yourself?"

Immediately, vivaciously, his wife turned half around from the table and replied, "Yes, very much indeed. . . We saw such a lot of lovely things and I left my heart behind in at least ten different shops."

Marcello said nothing. Giulia finished doing her hair in silence, then rose and came and sat beside him on the bed. She was wearing a black dress with a wide, ornate *décolletage* that revealed the firm, brown curves of her breasts like two fine fruits in a basket. A scarlet artificial rose was fastened at her shoulder. Her gentle, youthful face with its big smiling eyes and its full mouth wore its usual expression of sensual gaiety. In a smile that was perhaps unconscious Guilia showed, between her brightly painted lips, her regular teeth of brilliant, spotless whiteness. She took his hand affectionately, and said, "Now just imagine what happened to me."

"What?"

"This lady, Professor Quadri's wife. . . Well, just fancy . . . she's not a normal woman."

"What d'you mean?"

"She's one of those women who love other women . . . and in fact, just imagine, she's fallen in love with me . . . just like that . . . at first sight. . . She told me after you'd gone away. . . That's why she insisted so much on my staying and resting at her flat. . . She made me a regular, proper declaration of love. . . Whoever could have thought it?"

"And you—what did you do?"

"I wasn't expecting it at all. . . I was just dropping off to sleep, because I really was tired. . . At first I hardly understood. . . Then at last I did understand, and I really didn't know how to take it. . . You see, it was real, raging passion, just like a man. . . Tell me truthfully, would you ever have expected that, from a woman like her, so self-controlled, so very self-possessed?"

"No," answered Marcello gently, "I shouldn't have expected it . . . any more than I should expect," he added, "that you would reciprocate such effusions."

"Good heavens, are you by any chance jealous?" she exclaimed, bursting into a delighted, joyous laugh, "jealous of a woman? Even supposing I'd paid any attention to her, you oughtn't to be jealous. . . A woman isn't a man. . . But you can reassure yourself . . . practically nothing happened between us."

"*Practically* nothing?"

"I said practically," she replied in a reticent tone, "because, when I saw she was in such despair, I did allow her to squeeze my hand while she was bringing me to the hotel in her car."

"Only just to squeeze your hand?"

"But you *are* jealous," she exclaimed again, highly delighted. "You really are jealous. . . I've never seen you like

that before. . . Well, if you really want to know," she went on after a moment, "I also allowed her to give me a kiss . . . but only like one sister to another. . . Then, as she went on insisting and I got bored, I sent her away. . . That was all. . . Now, tell me, are you still jealous?"

Marcello had prolonged the conversation about Lina mainly in order to furnish himself with yet another proof of the difference between himself and his wife—he whose whole life was upset because of a thing that had never happened, and she who was open to every sort of experience, indulgent, forgetful in the flesh even more quickly than in the spirit. He asked gently, "But you yourself, in the past, have you never had any relationship of that kind?"

"No, never," she answered with decision. This curt tone was so unusual in her that Marcello knew at once that she was lying. "Come on," he insisted; "why lie about it? . . . No one who knew nothing about these things would have behaved as you did with Signora Quadri. . . Tell me the truth."

"But what does it matter to you?"

"It interests me to know."

Giulia sat silent for a moment, with downcast eyes, and then said slowly, "You see, the business with that man, that lawyer. . . Until the day I met you it had given me a real horror of men. . . Well, I had a friendship, but it didn't last long . . . with a girl, a student she was, of my own age. . . She was really fond of me, and it was mainly that affection of hers, at a moment when I needed it badly, that persuaded me. . . Then she became possessive, exacting and jealous, and so I broke it all off. . . I still see her occasionally in Rome, in one place or another. . . Poor dear, she's still very fond of me." Her face, after a moment of reticence and embarrassment, had now resumed its customary placid expression. Taking his hand, she added, "Don't worry, and don't be

jealous; you know I don't love anyone except you."

"Yes, I know," said Marcello. He remembered Giulia's tears in the sleeping car, and her attempt at suicide, and knew that she was sincere. From a conventional point of view she had looked on her lost virginity as a betrayal of trust, but she attached no real importance to her past errors.

"But I tell you," Giulia was saying, "that woman really is crazy. . . D'you know what she wants us to do? She wants us all to go a few days from now to Savoy, where they have a house. . . In fact, just fancy, she's already worked out a program."

"What program?"

"Her husband leaves tomorrow. She is staying a few days more in Paris. . . She says it's on business of her own, but I'm convinced it's really for me she's staying. . . Then she proposes we should all leave together and go and spend a week with them in the mountains. . . The fact that we're on our honeymoon doesn't seem to enter her head. . . For her, it's just as though *you* didn't exist. . . She wrote down the address of the house in Savoy for me, and made me swear I would persuade you to accept the invitation. . ."

"What is the address?"

"There it is," said Giulia, pointing to a piece of paper on the marble top of the bedside table, "but, good heavens, you don't really want to accept?"

"No, I don't, but perhaps you do?"

"For goodness' sake, d'you really think I take any notice of that woman? . . . I've told you already that I sent her away because she annoyed me with her persistence." Giulia had risen from the bed and, still talking, went out of the room. "By the way," she called from the bathroom, "someone telephoned for you about half an hour ago. . . It was a man's voice, an Italian. . . He wouldn't say who he was . . . but he

left a number and said would you ring him as soon as you can. . . I put down the number on that same piece of paper."

Marcello took up the paper, pulled out a notebook from his pocket and carefully wrote down both the address of the Quadris' house in Savoy and Orlando's telephone number. He felt he had now come to himself again after the transient exaltation of the afternoon; and he perceived this, in particular, from the mechanical nature of his actions and from the resigned melancholy that accompanied them. It was all over then, he thought, putting the notebook back in his pocket, and that fleeting appearance of love in his life had been, after all, merely the shock of his life's adjustment into its final, settled form. He thought again for a moment of Lina, and seemed to discern an unmistakable sign of fate in her sudden passion for Giulia, which, while it had allowed him to find out the address of the house in Savoy, had at the same time brought it about that, when Orlando and his men presented themselves there, she would not yet have arrived. Quadri's solitary departure and Lina's remaining in Paris fitted perfectly, in fact, into the plan of his mission. If things had gone differently, it was not clear how he and Orlando could have brought it to a satisfactory conclusion.

He got up, called to his wife that he was going down to wait for her in the hall, and went out. There was a telephone booth at the end of the corridor, and he went to it in a leisurely, almost automatic, manner. It was only the sound of the Secret Service man's voice issuing from the receiver and asking him, in a joking manner, "Well, sir, where are we going to have this little dinner of ours?" that seemed to bring him out of the cloud of his own thoughts. Quite calmly, speaking slowly but clearly, he proceeded to inform Orlando of Quadri's journey.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AS THEY got out of the taxi in a narrow street in the Latin Quarter, Marcello looked up at the sign over the door. *Le Coq au Vin* was written in white letters on a brown background at the first floor level of an old gray house. They went into the restaurant. A red velvet divan ran all round the room; the tables were in a row in front of the divan; and old rectangular mirrors in gilt frames reflected in the quiet light the central chandelier and the heads of the few customers. Marcello saw Quadri sitting in a corner beside his wife. Dressed in black, and shorter than her by a whole head, he was looking over his spectacles at the menu. Lina, on the other hand, in a black velvet dress that emphasized the whiteness of her arms and breast and the pallor of her face, was sitting erect and motionless and seemed to be anxiously watching the door. She jumped to her feet when she saw Giulia, and behind her, almost hidden by her, the professor also rose. The two women shook hands. Marcello raised his eyes and saw, suspended in the unostentatious yellow light of one of the mirrors, an incredible apparition—the head of Orlando, gazing at them. At the same moment the restaurant clock came to life, its metal entrails began to writhe and moan, and finally

it struck the hour. "Eight o'clock," he heard Lina exclaim in a contented tone; "How punctual you are!" Marcello shuddered, and, as the clock continued to strike its mournful, solemn-sounding notes, stretched out his hand to shake the hand that Quadri offered him. The clock struck its last note with energy, and then, as he pressed Quadri's palm against his own, he remembered that, according to agreement, it was this handshake that was to point out the victim to Orlando, and suddenly was almost tempted to stoop and kiss Quadri on his left cheek, just as Judas had done, to whom he had jestingly compared himself that afternoon. He actually seemed to feel the rough contact of that cheek beneath his lips, and wondered at so strong a power of suggestion. Then he looked up again at the mirror; Orlando's head was still there, hanging in the void, staring at them. At last they sat down, Quadri and himself on chairs and the two women opposite them, on the divan.

The wine waiter arrived with his list, and Quadri began ordering the wines with extreme care. He seemed completely absorbed in this occupation and had a long discussion with the waiter about the quality of his wines, that he appeared to know very well. Finally he ordered a dry white wine to go with the fish, a red wine with the roast, and some champagne on ice. The wine waiter was succeeded by the other waiter, with whom the same scene was repeated: knowing discussions about various dishes, hesitations, reflections, questions, answers, and finally the ordering of three dishes, *hors d'oeuvres,* fish and meat. In the meantime Lina and Giulia conversed in low tones, and Marcello, his eyes fixed on Lina, had fallen into a kind of dream. He still seemed to hear the frantic striking of the clock behind him while he was shaking hands with Quadri, he seemed to see again the decapitated head of Orlando looking at him out of the mirror; and he knew that

never, as at that moment, had he been so clearly confronted with his destiny. He was like a stone standing in the middle of a crossroad, with two roads, different but of equally decisive importance, leading away from him, one on each side. He started when he heard Quadri asking him, in his usual indifferent tone, "Been going around Paris?"

"Yes, a little."

"Like it?"

"Very much."

"Yes, it's a likeable place," said Quadri, as though speaking on his own account and almost making a concession to Marcello, "but I wish you'd give your attention to that point that I've already alluded to today—that it isn't the vicious city, filled with corruption, that the newspapers in Italy talk about. . . I'm certain you have that idea, and its an idea which doesn't correspond to reality."

"No, I haven't that idea," said Marcello, a little surprised.

"I'm astonished that you haven't," said the professor without looking at him, "all the young men of your generation have ideas of that kind. . . They think you can't be strong without being austere, and in order to feel austere they invent fantastic theories of an impossible kind."

"I don't think I'm particularly austere," said Marcello.

"I'm sure you are, and I'll prove it to you," said the professor. He waited till the waiter had put down the dishes of *hors d'oeuvres* and then went on. "Now. . . I bet that while I was ordering the wines you were secretly wondering that I could appreciate such things. . . Isn't that so?"

How had he guessed that? Marcello unwilling admitted, "You may be right . . . but there's no harm in it. . . The reason why I thought so was that you yourself have what you call an austere look."

"But not like yours, my dear boy, not like yours," repeated the professor pleasantly. "But let me go on. . . Now tell me the truth—you don't like wine and you don't understand it."

"No, to tell the truth I hardly ever drink," said Marcello; "but what does that matter?"

"It matters a great deal," said Quadri quietly. "A very great deal. . . And I'm also willing to bet that you don't appreciate good food."

"I eat—" began Marcello.

"You eat in order to eat," finished the professor with an accent of triumph, "which is just what I meant. . . And finally I'm sure you have a prejudice against love-making. . . If, for instance, you see a couple kissing each other in a public park, your first impulse is one of condemnation and disgust, and in all probability you will infer that the city in which the park is situated is a shameless city. . . Isn't that so?"

Marcello understood now what Quadri was getting at. He said, with an effort, "I don't infer anything. . . It's simply that I was probably not born with a taste for these things."

"It's not only that, but for you, those that do have such tastes are blameworthy and therefore to be despised. . . Admit that's what you feel."

"No, it's not that; they're different from me, that's all."

"He that is not with us is against us," said the professor, making a sudden sortie into politics. "That's one of the slogans that they love repeating, in Italy and in other places too, nowadays, isn't it?" He had meanwhile started eating, and with such gusto that his spectacles had got pushed out of place.

"It doesn't seem to me," said Marcello drily, "that politics have anything to do with these matters."

"Edmondo," said Lina.

"Yes, my dear?"

"You promised me we wouldn't talk about politics."

"But we're *not* talking about politics," said Quadri, "we're talking about Paris. . . In short," he concluded, "since Paris is a city where people love to eat and drink, to dance and kiss in the parks, in fact to amuse themselves—I'm sure your opinion of Paris can only be unfavorable."

This time Marcello said nothing. Giulia, with a smile, answered for him: "Anyhow *I* like the people of Paris very much indeed. . . They're so gay."

"Well said, Signora," the professor approved; "you must try and cure your husband."

"But he's not ill."

"Yes, he is; he's ill with austerity," said the professor, his head bent over his plate. And he added, almost between his teeth, "Or rather, austerity is just a symptom."

It now seemed obvious to Marcello that the professor—who, according to what Lina had told him, knew all about him—was amusing himself by playing with him like a cat with a mouse. He could not help thinking that it was a very innocent game compared with his own somber one, which had been started that afternoon at the Quadris' flat and which was destined to finish bloodily at the villa in Savoy. With a sort of melancholy coquettishness he asked Lina, "Do I really seem so austere . . . to you too?"

He saw her studying him with a cold, reluctant eye, in which he discerned, to his distress, the profound aversion which she cherished for him. Then, evidently, Lina decided to resume the role of amorous woman that she had taken it upon herself to play, for she replied, with a forced smile, "I don't know, you well enough. . . You certainly give one the impression of being very serious."

"Ah, that's certainly true," said Giulia, looking affectionately at her husband. "I suppose I've seen him smile perhaps a dozen times. . . Serious is the word."

Lina was gazing fixedly at him now, with malicious intentness. "No," she said slowly, "no, I was wrong. . . Serious is *not* the word. . . Worried would be more correct."

"Worried about what?"

Marcello saw her shrug her shoulders, indifferently. "That, of course, I don't know." But, at the same moment, to his great surprise, he felt her foot, under the table, slowly and deliberately first touching his own lightly and then pressing it.

Then Quadri said in a kindly manner, "Clerici, don't worry too much about looking worried. . . It's nothing but talk, just to pass the time. . . You're on your honeymoon—that's the only thing that ought to worry you. . . Isn't that true, Signora?" He smiled at Giulia, with that smile of his which looked like a grimace caused by some mutilation; and Giulia smiled back at him, saying gaily, "Perhaps it's just that that's worrying him—isn't that so, Marcello?"

Lina still continued to press his foot with hers, and he experienced at this contact a sense of duplication—as though the ambiguity of his love-relationships had now been transferred to his whole life and there were two situations instead of only one: the first, in which he pointed out Quadri to Orlando and went back to Italy with Giulia, the second in which he saved Quadri, deserted Giulia, and stayed in Paris with Lina. The two situations, like two superimposed photographs, cut across each other and were confused by the varying colors of his feelings of regret and horror, of hope and of melancholy, of resignation and of revolt. He knew perfectly well that Lina was pressing his feet merely in order to deceive him and to perform faithfully her role of the woman in love;

and yet, absurd though it was, he almost hoped that this was not true and that she did seriously love him. He was wondering all the time why in the world she had chosen, out of so many possible ones, this particular method—so traditional and so common—of expressing sentimental understanding, and he seemed to find in that choice another sign of her settled contempt for him, as a person who did not require very much subtlety or inventiveness to deceive him. Meanwhile Lina, still pressing his foot and gazing at him with intention, was saying, "About this honeymoon of yours. . . I've already spoken to Giulia, but as I know Giulia won't have the courage to speak to you about it, I'm going to make the suggestion myself. . . Why don't you come and spend the last part of it in Savoy? . . . With us? . . . We shall be there the whole summer. . . We've got a lovely spare room. . . You could stay a week or ten days or as long as you like . . . and go straight back to Italy from there."

So, Marcello said to himself, almost disappointed, so that was the cause of the foot-pressing. It occurred to him again, this time with a touch of spite, how extremely well the invitation to Savoy fitted in with Orlando's plan: if they accepted the invitation, they would keep Lina in Paris and in the meantime Orlando would have plenty of time to deal with Quadri down there in the mountains. He said slowly, "Personally I've nothing against a jaunt to Savoy . . . but not for a week or so . . . not before we've seen Paris."

"But that's perfect," cried Lina at once, triumphantly; "you can come down there with me. . . My husband's going on tomorrow. . . I've got to stay another week in Paris too."

Marcello observed that her foot was no longer pressing against his. As the need that had inspired it ceased, so the flattery ceased also; and Lina had not even thought to thank

him by a glance. From Lina his eyes moved to his wife, and he saw that she was looking displeased. Then she said, "I'm sorry I can't agree with my husband . . .and I'm sorry also if I seem rude to you, Signora Quadri . . . but it's impossible for us to go to Savoy."

"Why?" Marcello could not help exclaiming. "After Paris. . ."

"After Paris, as you know, we've got to go to the Côte d'Azur to join those friends of ours." This was a lie, for they had no friends on the Côte d'Azur. Marcello saw that Giulia was lying in order to get rid of Lina and at the same time to demonstrate to him her indifference to the other woman. But there was a danger that Lina, disgusted at Giulia's refusal, might leave with Quadri. It was necessary, therefore, to guard against this and to make his recalcitrant wife accept the invitation without more ado. He said hastily, "Oh, those people—we can give that up if necessary. . . We can see them at any time."

"The Côte d'Azur!—but how awful," exclaimed Lina, pleased at Marcello's siding with her. And she went on, in a gay, impetuous, singsong voice, "Whoever goes to the Côte d'Azur! . . . South American adventurers, *cocottes*. . ."

"Yes, but we promised to go," said Giulia obstinately.

Again Marcello felt Lina's foot pressing his own. With an effort, he said, "Come on, Giulia, why shouldn't we accept?"

"Well, if you really want to. . . ." she replied, bending her head.

He saw Lina, at these words, turn toward Giulia with a disturbed, sad, irritated, surprised look on her face. "But why?" she cried, with a kind of wondering consternation in her voice, "what is it? . . . Just that you want to see that horrible Côte d'Azur? . . . That's simply being provincial. . . Nobody but provincials wants to visit the Côte d'Azur. . . I assure you,

no one in your place would hesitate for a moment. . . Why!" she went on suddenly, with desperate vivacity, "there must be some reason that you're not telling us. . . Perhaps you've taken a dislike to my husband and me?"

Marcello could not but admire the violence of passion that permitted Lina to make what was, in effect, a lover's scene with Giulia in his own and Quadri's presence. Giulia, somewhat surprised, protested, "Please . . . really. . . What *are* you saying?"

Quadri, who was silently eating and appeared to be enjoying his food rather than listening to the conversation, observed with his usual indifference, "Lina, you're embarrassing the lady. . . Even if she has taken a dislike to us, as you say, she'll never tell us so."

"Yes, you've taken a dislike to us," Lina went on, taking no notice of her husband, "or rather, perhaps it's *me* you've taken a dislike to. . . Is that so, my dear? . . . You've taken a dislike to me. . . One imagines," she went on, turning to Marcello and still speaking with that same desperate social vivacity which hinted at things it did not say, "one imagines that somebody likes one, and sometimes, instead, it's just the people one wants to be liked by who simply can't bear one. . . Now be truthful, my dear, and admit that you can't bear me. . . And while I'm talking like this and stupidly insisting that you should come and stay with us in Savoy, you're thinking, 'What does this crazy woman want of me? How is it she doesn't realize that I can't endure her face, her voice, or her manners—her whole personality, in fact?'. . . Be truthful, admit that's just the kind of thing you're thinking at this very moment."

Now, thought Marcello, she had abandoned all prudence; and if it was perhaps possible for the husband to attribute no importance to these heart-wrung insinuations, he himself—for

whose benefit, according to the pretence, all this insistence was being displayed—could hardly fail to realize for whom they were really intended. Giulia, mildly astonished, protested, "But what *are* you thinking about? . . . I should really like to know why you think these things."

"So it's true," exclaimed the afflicted woman, "you *have* taken a dislike to me." Then, turning to her husband, she said, with febrile, bitter complacency, "You see, Edmondo, you said she wouldn't tell me. . . But now she *has* told me: she *has* taken a dislike to me."

"I didn't say that," said Giulia smiling; "I never even dreamed of such a thing. . ."

"You didn't say it but you made it quite clear."

Quadri, without raising his eyes from his plate, said, "Lina, I don't understand why you go on arguing like this. . .. Why should Signora Clerici have taken a dislike to you? She's only known you for a few hours, and probably she hasn't any particular feeling about you."

Marcello saw that he would have to intervene again; Lina's eyes, angry and almost insulting in their look of scorn and imperiousness, demanded it of him. She was no longer pressing his foot now, but, with crazy imprudence, at a moment when he happened to place his hand on the table, she pretended to be taking some salt and gave his fingers a squeeze. He said, in a conciliating but decisive manner, "Giulia and I, on the contrary, both like you very much indeed . . . and we accept your invitation with pleasure. . . We'll certainly come —won't we, Giulia?"

"Yes, of course," said Giulia, suddenly surrendering; "it was only because of that engagement of ours. . . We really wanted to accept."

"Splendid . . . Then that's understood . . . We'll leave together in a week's time." Lina was radiant, and at once

started to talk of the walks they would take in Savoy, of the beauty of that part of the country, of the house in which they would be staying. Marcello noticed, however, that she talked in a confused way, more in obedience, as it were, to an urge to sing—like a bird suddenly gladdened by a ray of sunshine inside its cage—than to the necessity of saying anything particular or giving any particular information. And, just as a bird gains vigor from its own singing, so did she appear to become intoxicated with the sound of her own voice, that trembled with the exultation of an imprudent, uncontrolled delight. Feeling himself excluded from the conversation between the two women, Marcello almost mechanically looked up at the mirror hanging at Quadri's back: the honest, good-natured face of Orlando was still there, suspended in the void, decapitated but alive. But it was no longer alone: beside it, in profile, no less precise and no less absurd, another head could now be seen, talking to the head of Orlando. It was the head of a bird of prey, but with nothing of the eagle about it; of a bird of prey of a poor, inferior species—with small, dull, deep-set eyes beneath a low forehead; a large, melancholy, beaky nose; hollow cheeks with the shadow of asceticism upon them; a small mouth; a shriveled chin. Marcello allowed his eyes to rest for some time upon this face, wondering if he had seen it before; and he started when Quadri's voice asked him, "By the way, Clerici . . . If I asked a favor of you . . . would you grant it me?"

It was an unexpected question; and Marcello noticed that Quadri had waited to ask it until his wife had at last stopped talking. "Certainly," he said, "if it's in my power."

It seemed to him that Quadri looked at his wife before he spoke, as if to have her corroboration of an agreement already discussed and arranged. "It's about the following matter," Quadri then said, in a tone of voice both gentle and

cynical, "You are certainly not ignorant of my activities here in Paris and of the reason why I have never gone back to Italy . . . Now we have friends in Italy with whom we correspond as best we can . . . One of the methods we use is to entrust letters to people who have no concern with politics, or who anyhow are not suspected of carrying on any political activities . . . I thought perhaps you would take one of these letters to Italy for me . . . and post it at the first station you happen to come to—Turin, for instance."

There was a silence. Marcello now realized that Quadri's request had no other purpose than to put him to the test, or, at the least, to embarrass him; and he also saw that it was made by agreement with Lina. Probably Quadri, faithful to his system of persuasion, had convinced his wife of the expedience of this plan—though not to such an extent as to modify her hostility towards Marcello. The latter thought he could guess this from the cold, drawn, almost irritated look on her face. But he could not, for the moment, perceive what other purpose Quadri could have in view. To gain time, he answered, "But if they find out, I shall end up in prison."

Quadri smiled and said, jokingly, "That wouldn't do any great harm . . . On the contrary, for us it would be quite a good thing . . . Don't you know that political movements require martyrs and victims?"

Lina frowned but said nothing. Giulia looked at Marcello anxiously. It was obvious that she wanted her husband to refuse. Marcello resumed, slowly, "In fact, you really almost want the letter to be discovered."

"No, not that," said the professor, pouring himself some wine in a playful, careless manner which, for some reason, almost made Marcello sorry for him. "What we want is that the greatest possible number of people should compromise themselves and fight on our side . . . Going to prison for our

cause is only one of a very large number of ways of compromising oneself and joining in the struggle—certainly not the only one." He drank slowly; then went on, seriously and in an unexpected manner. "But I only asked you, so to speak, as a matter of form . . . I know you'll refuse."

"You guessed right," said Marcello, who had been weighing the pros and cons of the proposal. "I'm sorry, but I don't think I can do you this service."

"My husband isn't concerned with politics," explained Giulia with nervous solicitude, "he's a government official . . . he's outside all that."

"Yes, of course," said Quadri, with an air of indulgence, almost of affection; "of course; he's a government official."

It seemed to Marcello that Quadri was curiously satisfied at his reply. His wife, on the other hand, looked angry. She asked Giulia, in an aggressive tone: "Why are you so afraid of your husband being concerned with politics?"

"What's the use of it?" answered Giulia, with perfect naturalness; "He's got to think of his own future, not of politics."

"That's how the women in Italy argue," said Lina, turning to her husband, "and then you're surprised that things go as they do."

Giulia was annoyed. "Really, Italy has nothing to do with it . . . In certain circumstances the women of any country would argue in the same way . . . If you lived in Italy, you'd think as I do."

"Now, now, don't get angry," said Lina, with a gloomy but affectionate laugh, passing her hand, in a rapid caress, around Giulia's sulky face. "I was joking. . . You may be right . . . Anyhow you're so charming when you defend your husband and get angry on his behalf. . . Isn't it true, Edmondo, that she's charming?"

Quadri made a vague, slightly disgusted, sign of agreement, as much as to say, "women's talk," and then went on, seriously, "You're right, Signora . . . A man should never be placed in the position of having to choose between truth and bread."

The subject, it seemed to Marcello, was exhausted. Nevertheless he was still curious to know the real reason of the proposal. The waiter changed the plates and put a big dish of fruit on the table. Then the wine waiter came up and asked whether he should open the bottle of champagne. "Yes, certainly, open it," said Quadri.

The waiter took the bottle out of the ice pail, wrapped its neck in a napkin, pushed the cork upwards and then, swiftly, poured the foaming wine into the champagne glasses. Quadri rose to his feet, glass in hand. "Let us drink to the Cause," he said; and turning to Marcello, "You didn't want to take the letter, but at least you won't mind drinking a toast, will you?" He seemed moved, and his eyes were bright with tears; and yet Marcello noticed a certain look of cunning, even of calculation, both in the way he proposed the toast and in the expression of his face. Marcello looked at his wife, and at Lina, before he answered. Giulia, who had risen to her feet, gave him a meaning glance, as much as to say, "You can surely drink the toast." Lina was holding her glass in her hand and her eyes were downcast, and she looked cold and angry, almost bored. Marcello stood up and said, "To the Cause, then," and held out his glass to tap it against Quadri's. With an almost childish scruple he was careful to add mentally "*my* Cause," although it seemed to him now that he no longer had any cause to defend but merely a painful incomprehensible duty to perform. He noticed with displeasure that Lina avoided tapping her glass against his. Giulia, on the other hand, with exaggerated cordiality,

sought each person's glass, calling their names in a touchingly eager manner. "Lina, Signor Quadri, Marcello." The sharp, melancholy tinkling sound of the glasses made him shudder again, as the striking of the clock had done previously. He looked up at the mirror and saw the head of Orlando hanging in mid-air, staring at him with bright, expressionless eyes—truly like the eyes in a severed head. Quadri held out his glass to the waiter, who filled it again; then, endowing the gesture with a characteristic, sentimental emphasis, he turned towards Marcello, raising his glass, and said, "And now to your own personal health, Clerici . . . and thank you." He stressed the word "thank you" in a meaning manner, emptied his glass at one gulp and sat down.

For some minutes they drank in silence. Giulia had twice emptied her glass, and was now looking at her husband with a tender, grateful, tipsy expression. Suddenly she exclaimed: "How good champagne is! . . . I say, Marcello, don't you think champagne's good stuff?"

"Yes, it's a very good wine," he admitted.

"You don't appreciate it enough," said Giulia. "It's absolutely delicious . . . I'm tight already." She laughed and shook her head and then suddenly went on, raising her glass, "Come on, Marcello, let's drink to our love."

Tipsy, laughing, she held out her glass. The professor looked on from a distance; Lina, with a cold, disgusted expression on her face, made no attempt to hide her disapproval. Suddenly Giulia changed her mind. "No," she cried, "you're too austere, it's quite true . . . You're ashamed to drink to our love . . . so I shall drink, all by myself, to life—to life that I love and that's so beautiful . . . to life!" She drank with a joyful, awkward haste that caused part of the wine to be upset on the table; then she cried, "That brings luck!" and, wetting her fingers in the wine, made as if to touch

Marcello on the temples. He could not help making a movement as though to defend himself. Then Giulia jumped up, exclaiming, "You *are* ashamed . . . well, I'm not"; and she went round the table and embraced Marcello, almost falling on top of him and kissing him hard on the mouth. "We're on our honeymoon," she said in a challenging tone as she went back to her place, breathless and laughing; "we're on our honeymoon and we're not here to engage in politics or carry back letters to Italy."

Quadri, to whom these words appeared to be addressed, said calmly, "You're quite right, Signora." Marcello, between Quadri's conscious allusions and his wife's unconscious, innocent ones, preferred to remain silent, and sat with downcast eyes. Lina allowed a moment's pause to elapse and then asked, in a casual sort of way, "What are you doing tomorrow?"

"We're going to Versailles," replied Marcello, wiping Giulia's lipstick from his mouth with his handkerchief.

"I'll come too," said Lina eagerly. "Let's go in the morning and have lunch there . . . I'll help my husband pack and then I'll come and fetch you."

"All right," said Marcello.

Lina went on, conscientiously, "I should like to have driven you there . . . but my husband's taking the car, so we shall have to go by train . . It's gayer, anyhow."

Quadri did not appear to have heard. He was paying the bill, and was extracting—and emphasizing his deformity as he did so—banknotes folded in four from the pocket of his striped trousers. Marcello was on the point of handing him some money but Quadri refused it, saying: "Some other time . . . in Italy."

All of a sudden Giulia burst out, in a very loud, uneven

voice: "In Savoy we'll be together . . . but I want to go to Versailles alone with my husband."

"Thank you," said Lina ironically, rising from the table; "that's what's called plain speaking, anyhow."

"Please don't be offended," began Marcello, embarrased, "it's the champagne . . ."

"No it's not, it's my love for you, you stupid," cried Giulia. Laughing, she went off with the professor toward the door. Marcello heard her continue, "Does it seem wrong to you that I should want to be alone with my husband during our honeymoon?"

"No, my dear," replied Quadri gently, "it's perfectly right."

Lina, meanwhile, was commenting in an acid tone, "How silly of me, I hadn't thought of it . . . Of course the expedition to Versailles is part of the ritual for young married couples."

At the door, Marcello insisted on Quadri's going out in front of him. As he was going out, he again heard the clock strike the hour; it was ten o'clock.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE professor took his seat at the wheel of the car, leaving the door open. "Your husband can go in front with mine," Lina said to Giulia, "and you come in the back with me."

But Giulia answered, in a teasing, tipsy way, "Why should I? Personally, I'd rather go in front," and she jumped in resolutely beside Quadri. So Marcello and Lina found themselves side by side on the back seat.

Marcello now felt a desire to take Lina at her word and behave as if he really believed that she loved him. In this desire there was more than a mere vindictive impulse; there was also a remnant of hope, as though in a contradictory and involuntary way he still had illusions about Lina's feelings. The car moved off, then slowed down at a dark spot in order to turn into a side street; and Marcello, taking advantage of the darkness, seized Lina's hand that was lying on her knee and pulled it down on to the seat between them. He saw her turn at his touch with an angry jerk, but this was quickly transformed into a false gesture of complicity and of urgent warning. The car went on, threading the narrow streets of the Latin Quarter, and all the time Marcello

was squeezing Lina's hand. He could feel it lying tense within his own, rejecting his caress not merely with its muscles but even, so to speak, with its skin, while the fingers wriggled impotently in what seemed to be a mixture of repugnance, indignation and rage. At a corner the car heeled over and they fell against each other. Then Marcello seized Lina by the back of the neck, just as one takes hold of a cat that might turn and scratch, and, twisting her head to one side, kissed her on the mouth. She tried to disengage herself, but Marcello took a tighter hold on the thin, shaven, boyish neck, and then Lina, with a subdued groan, gave up all resistance and submitted to the kiss. Her lips, Marcello noticed, were twisted into a grimace of disgust; and at the same time the sharp nails of the hand that he still held in his were pressed into his palm, in a gesture that might have been thought to be voluptuous but that Marcello knew was, in reality, charged with horror and loathing. He prolonged the kiss as much as he possibly could, looking now at her eyes, that were sparkling with hatred and impatient repugnance. now, at the black motionless heads of Giulia and Quadri in front. The headlights of an approaching car lit up the windshield brilliantly: Marcello get go of Lina and threw himself back in his seat.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw her fall back in her seat and then slowly raise her handkerchief to her mouth and wipe it in a thoughtful, disgusted manner. And then, noticing with what care and what distaste she cleaned those lips which, according to the pretence, should have still been palpitating and greedy for more kisses, there swept over him an obscure feeling of desperate, heart-rending pain.

"Love me!" he wanted to cry out, "love me . . . for God's sake, love me!" It suddenly seemed to him that not only his own life, but Lina's too, now depended upon her love

for him—so longed-for, so impossible. Now, as though infected by Lina's steadfast loathing, he realized that he too was filled with a hatred which, though mixed with love and inseparable from it, was yet bloody and murderous. At that moment he felt he would willingly have killed her; for it seemed unbearable to him to know that she was alive and an enemy; and he felt also—though he was frightened at feeling it—that to see her die would now, possibly, give him greater pleasure than to be loved by her. Then a sudden, generous impulse of the spirit made him sorry, and he said to himself, "Thank Heaven, she won't be in Savoy when Orlando and the others get there . . . thank Heaven." And he saw that he had really wished for a moment to have her killed with her husband, in the same way and at the same time.

The car stopped and they got out. Marcello had a glimpse of a dark suburban street, with an uneven row of small houses on one side and a garden wall on the other. "You'll see," said Lina, taking Giulia by the arm, "it's not exactly a place for girls from a convent school . . . but it's interesting." They went to an illuminated doorway, above which a small rectangle of red glass bore, in blue letters, the words: *La Cravate Noire*. "The Black Tie," explained Lina to Giulia; "it means the black tie that men wear with dinner jackets and that all the women here wear, from the waitresses to the proprietress." They went into the vestibule and immediately a face with hard features and short hair, but beardless and of feminine complexion and character, appeared above the cloakroom counter, saying in a thin voice: *"Vestiare."* Giulia, amused, went up to the counter and turned around, letting her cloak fall from her bare shoulders into the hands of this attendant in a black jacket, starched shirt and bow tie. Then, in an atmosphere thick with smoke

and a deafening hum of music and voices, they passed through to the dance floor.

A handsome woman, of uncertain age but no longer young, her plump, pale, smoth face rounded off under the chin by the usual black bow tie, came forward between the crowded tables to meet them. She greeted Quadri's wife with affectionate familiarity, and then, raising to her commanding eye a monocle that was fastened by a silk cord to the lapel of her masculine jacket, said, "Four people . . . I've just the right thing for you, Madame Quadri . . . Please come this way . . ." Lina, who appeared to have been put in a good humor by the place they were in, leaned over the shoulder of the woman with the eyeglass and made some gay, malicious remark, to which she responded, in a manly fashion, with a shrug of the shoulders and a scornful grimace. Following her, they reached an empty table at the far end of the room. *"Voilá!"* said the proprietress. Now she, in her turn, bent down over Lina who had taken her seat, murmured something into her ear with a jocular, impudent, look, and then, very upright, her small, glossy head held commandingly erect, went off among the tables.

A small, sturdy, very dark-complexioned waitress, dressed in the same fashion, came to their table, and Lina, with the gay, self-possessed sureness of someone who at last finds herself in a place that suits her tastes, ordered the drinks. Then she turned towards Giulia and said cheerfully, "You see how they're dressed? . . . Just like a convent, isn't it? . . . Don't you think it's odd?"

Giulia, it seemed to Marcello, was now looking embarrassed; and she smiled in an entirely conventional manner. In a small round space among the tables, under a kind of inverted cement mushroom that vibrated with the unreal light of neon lamps, was a throng of dancing couples, some

of them women dancing together. The orchestra—also composed of women dressed as men—was banished under the stairs that led to the gallery. The professor said, in rather a vague way, "I don't care for this place . . . These women seem to me to be more worthy of pity than of curiosity." Lina did not appear to have heard her husband's remark. She never stopped gazing at Giulia, with eyes that were filled with a devouring, infatuated, yearning light. At last, as if yielding to an irresistible longing, she suggested, with a nervous laugh: "Shall we dance together? They'll take us for two of themselves . . . it'll be amusing . . . Let's pretend to be like them . . . Come along, do . . ."

Laughing excitedly, she had already risen to her feet and, with one hand on Giulia's shoulder, was urging her to do the same. Giulia, irresolute, looked first at her and then at her husband. Marcello said drily, "What are you looking at me for? . . . There's no harm in it." He saw that, now again, he had to support Lina. Giulia sighed and rose slowly and unwillingly to her feet. The other woman, in the meantime, seemed to lose her head altogether, and kept repeating, "If even your husband says there's no harm in it . . . Come along, do, come along . . ." As Giulia went off, she said, "To tell the truth, I'm not particularly anxious to be taken for one of them." But she walked off in front of Lina and, when she reached the space reserved for dancing, turned back toward her with arms outstretched so that Lina could take hold of her. Marcello watched Lina go close to her, put her arm around Giulia's waist with manly assurance and authority, and then, falling into a dance step, guide her on to the dance floor among the other couples. For a moment he gazed, in vague but painful astonishment at the two women dancing in each other's arms. Giulia was shorter than Lina, they were dancing cheek

to cheek, and, at each step, Lina's arm seemed to enfold Giulia's waist more closely. To him it appeared a sad and unbelievable sight: there, he could not help thinking, was the love which, had the world been different, had life been different, would have been his, would have saved him, would have brought him joy. But he was aware of a hand on his arm. He turned and saw Quadri's red, shapeless face bending towards him. "Clerici," said Quadri in a voice full of emotion, "don't imagine that I haven't understood you."

Marcello looked at him and said slowly: "Excuse me, but now it's I who fail to understand *you.*"

"Clerici," answered the other man quickly, "you know who *I* am . . . but I also know who *you* are." He was looking at him intently, and had now taken hold, with both hands of the lapels of Marcello's jacket. The latter, agitated, frozen with a sort of terror, stared back into his face: no, there was no hatred in Quadri's eyes, there was, rather, a look of sentimental, tearful, melting emotion which at the same time had something slightly calculating and malicious about it. Then Quadri went on, "I know who you are, and I realize that, by speaking in this way, I may give you the impression that I am under an illusion, that I am being naïve, or even downright stupid . . . Never mind . . . Clerici, I want, in spite of everything, to be sincere with you, and I say to you: thank you."

Macello looked at him but said nothing. Quadri's hands were still on the lapels of his coat and he felt it being pulled tightly down on his neck as though someone had seized hold of him with the object of thrusting him violently away. "I say to you: thank you," continued Quadri, "for having refused to take that letter to Italy . . . If you had done your duty, you would have taken the letter and handed it on to your superiors . . . so as to get it deciphered and have

the people it was addressed to arrested . . . You didn't do it, Clerici, you refused to do it . . . from loyalty, from a sudden recognition of error or a sudden doubt, from honesty . . . I don't know . . . I only know that you didn't do it and I repeat again: thank you."

Marcello was on the point of replying, but Quadri, at last letting go of his jacket, put his hand in front of his mouth. "No," he said, "don't tell me you refused to take charge of the letter in order not to arouse my suspicions, in order to act up to your own obligations as a bridegroom on his honeymoon . . . Don't tell me that because I know it isn't true . . . What you've really done is to take the first step towards your own redemption . . . and I thank you for having given me the opportunity of helping you to take it . . . Go on, Clerici . . . and you may be truly reborn to a new life." Quadri fell back in his seat and made a pretence of wishing to quench his thirst, taking a long draught from his glass. "But here are the ladies," he said, rising to his feet. Marcello, bewildered, followed his example.

He noticed that Lina appeared to be in a bad temper. When she had sat down, she opened her compact in an angry, hurried sort of way, and with a series of furious dabs hastily powdered her nose and cheecks. Giulia, on the other hand, was quite placid and indifferent. She sat down beside her husband and took his hand affectionately, under the table, as if to assert clearly her feeling of repugnance for Lina. The proprietress with the eyeglass came up to them and crinkling her smooth, pale cheek into a honeyed smile, asked in an affected voice whether everything was all right.

Lina answered tartly that things couldn't be better. The proprietress bent down towards Giulia and said to her, "It's the first time you've been here . . . May I offer you a flower?"

"Thank you," said Giulia, surprised.

"Christina," called the proprietress. Another girl in a dinner jacket came up—very different from the respendent flower girls usually to be found at night clubs. She was pale and thin, with no make-up, and had an Oriental-looking face with a big nose, thick lips, and a bare, bony forehead beneath hair cut extremely short and unevenly, so that it looked as if it had fallen out as the result of an illness. She held out a basket of gardenias, and the proprietress, having selected one, pinned it on Giulia's bosom, with the words, "An offering from the management."

"Thank you," repeated Giulia.

"Not all all," said the proprietress. Now, I'll bet Madame is Spanish . . . isn't that so?"

"Italian," said Lina.

"Ah, Italian . . . I ought to have known it . . . with those black eyes . . ." The words were lost in the noise of the crowd, as the proprietress and the thin, melancholy Christina went off together.

The band had now started to play again. Lina turned towards Marcello and said to him, almost angrily, "Why don't you ask me to dance? I should like to." Without a word he rose and followed her to the dance floor.

They began dancing. Lina held herself well away from Marcello, who could not help remembering sadly the possessive affection with which, a short time before, she had clung to Giulia. They danced in silence for a little, and then, all of a sudden, with a violence in which the fiction of their amorous collusion was curiously tinged with anger and aversion, Lina said to him, "Instead of kissing me in the car, with the risk of my husband noticing it, you might have made your wife give in about the expedition to Versailles."

Marcello was astonished at the naturalness with which

she grafted her real anger on to the unreal love-relationship; and also at the cynical, brutal, familiar way in which she addressed him, which seemed typical of a woman who has no scruple in betraying her husband. For a moment he said nothing. Lina, interpreting this silence in her own way, persisted, "Why don't you say something? . . . Is this your love? You're not even capable of making that silly wife of yours obey you."

"My wife isn't silly," he replied gently, more puzzled than offended by this strange anger.

She flung herself without hesitation into the opening that this answer gave her. "What d'you mean, she's not silly?" she exclaimed, irritated and almost surprised. "My dear man, even a blind man could see it . . . She's beautiful, certainly, but completely stupid . . . a beautiful animal . . . How can you fail to see that?"

"I like her as she is," he hazarded.

"A goose . . . A fool . . . the Côte d'Azur . . . Just a little provincial miss without a crumb of brain . . . The Côte d'Azur, indeed . . . Why not Monte Carlo then, or Deauville? . . . or even just the Eiffel Tower?" She seemed beside herself with rage—which, to Marcello's mind, was a sure sign that there had been some unpleasant discussion between her and Giulia while they were dancing together.

"Don't worry about my wife," he said gently. "Just come to the hotel tomorrow morning . . . Giulia will have to accept the fact that you're there . . . and we'll all three go to Versailles."

She threw him a look almost of hope. But then anger prevailed again and she said, "What an absurd idea! . . . Your wife said quite clearly that she did not want me to come . . . and I haven't the habit of going where I'm not wanted."

Marcello answered simply, "Well, I want you to come."

"Yes, but your wife doesn't."

"What does it matter to you about my wife? Isn't it enough that you and I love each other?"

She studied him uneasily and mistrustfully, pulling back her head, her soft, arching breast close against his. "Really," she said, "you talk of our love as if we'd been lovers for goodness knows how long . . . But d'you think we love each other seriously?"

Marcello would have liked to say, "Why don't you love me? I could love you so much." But the words died on his lips, like echoes smothered by an impassable remoteness. It seemed to him that he had never loved her so much as at this moment, when, forcing pretence to the point of parody, she insincerely asked him if he were sure he loved her. At last, sadly, he said, "You know I wish we loved each other."

"So do I," she answered vaguely; and it was clear that she was thinking of Giulia. Then, as though waking up to reality, she added with sudden rage, "In any case, please don't kiss me again in the car or anywhere like that . . . I've never been able to bear effusions of that kind . . . They seem to me to show not only a lack of consideration but a lack of breeding as well."

"You haven't yet told me," he said, clenching his teeth, "whether you are coming to Versailles tomorrow."

He saw her hesitate, and then, perplexed, she asked, "Do you really think your wife won't be annoyed when she sees me arriving? . . . She won't insult me as she did today at the restaurant?"

"I'm sure she won't. She may be a bit surprised, that's all. But before you come I'll be sure and bring her round."

"Will you be able to?"

"Yes."

"I have the impression that your wife can't endure me," she said in a questioning tone, as though waiting to be reassured.

"You're wrong," he replied, gratifying her half-expressed wish, "on the contrary, she likes you very much."

"Really?"

"Yes, really . . . She was telling me so only today."

"And what did she say?"

"Oh Lord, nothing very special . . . That you were beautiful, that you seemed intelligent . . . the truth, in fact."

"I'll come, then," she decided, "I'll come immediately after my husband leaves . . . about nine . . . so that we can catch the ten o'clock train . . . I'll come to your hotel."

Marcello resented this haste, this relief on her part, as yet another offence to his own feeling for her. And, kindled suddenly by an indefinable longing for a love-relationship of any kind, even a false, ambiguous one, he said, "I'm so glad you've decided to come."

"Yes?"

"Yes, because I don't think you'd have done it unless you loved me."

"I might have done it for some other reason," she replied maliciously.

"What reason?"

"We women are spiteful . . . just to be spiteful to your wife."

So she thought only of Giulia, all the time. Marcello said nothing, but, still dancing, guided her toward the entrance door. Two more turns, and they found themselves right in front of the cloakroom, one step from the door. "But where are you taking me?" she asked.

"Listen," pleaded Marcello in a low voice, so that the

attendant, standing behind the counter, could not hear him, "let's go out into the street for a moment."

"What for?"

"There's no one there . . . I want you to give me a kiss . . . of your own accord . . to show me that you really love me."

"I shouldn't dream of such a thing," she said, her anger flaring up again suddenly.

"But why? . . . It's a deserted street, quite dark . . ."

"I've already told you that I can't bear these public displays."

"Please."

"Leave me alone," she said, in a hard, loud voice; and she disengaged herself and went quickly back to the dance floor. Marcello, as though swept away by her outburst, crossed the threshold and went out into the street.

The street, as he had told Lina, was dark and deserted, and the pavements, dimly lit by infrequent lampposts, were bare of passers-by. On the far side of the street, under the high garden wall, stood a few cars. Marcello took his handkerchief from his pocket and stood looking at the leafy tree tops above the wall as he wiped his sweating brow. He felt stunned, as if he had received a sharp, violent blow over the head. He did not remember ever having so humbly entreated a woman before, and was almost ashamed of having done so. At the same time he realized that all hope of inducing Lina not so much to love him as simply, even, to understand him, had now vanished. At that moment he heard behind him the sound of a car engine, and then the car itself slid up beside him and stopped. There was a light inside; and at the wheel Marcello saw the figure—looking just like that of a family chauffeur—of the Secret Service

agent Orlando. His companion with the long, thin, bird-of-prey face sat beside him. "Sir," whispered Orlando.

Automatically Marcello went up to the car. "Sir . . . we're going now . . . He leaves tomorrow morning by car and we shall follow him . . . But probably we shan't wait till we get to Savoy."

"Why?" asked Marcello, hardly knowing what he was saying.

"It's a long journey and Savoy's a long way off . . . Why wait till we get to Savoy if we can do it earlier and in better conditions? . . . Good-bye, sir . . . See you in Italy." Orlando raised his hand in farewell and his companion gave a slight bow. The car slid away, turned the corner at the far end of the street and disappeared.

Marcello turned back into the house and re-entered the dance floor. The music had started again and he found only Quadri at the table. Lina and Giulia were dancing together; he could see them mingling with the thick crowd on the dance floor. He sat down, took up his glass and slowly emptied it, his eyes fixed on the piece of ice at the bottom. Quadri said suddenly, "Clerici, d'you know you could be very useful to us?"

"I don't understand," said Marcello, putting down his glass.

Quadri proceeded to explain, without the slightest embarrassment. "To anyone else I would propose staying here in Paris . . . There's plenty to do for everyone, I assure you . . . and we have a special need of young men like you . . . But you could be even more useful to us by staying where you are now . . . in your present position."

"By giving you information," Marcello concluded, looking him in the eyes.

"Precisely."

At these words Marcello could not help recalling the sight of Quadri's eyes shining with emotion, almost tearful, sincerely affectionate, when, a little earlier, he had taken hold of him by the lapels of his coat. That emotion, he reflected, was the sentimental velvet in which were hidden the claws of cold political calculation. It was that same emotion, he reflected again, which he had noticed in the eyes of certain of his own superiors—though of different quality, patriotic instead of humanitarian. But of what use were these justificatory sentiments when, in both cases, in all cases, there grew from them no sort of consideration for *him,* for his own human personality, that was coolly regarded as a mere means, among many others, for attaining certain ends? He felt, with an indifference that was almost bureaucratic, that Quadri, in making this request, had countersigned his own death sentence. He looked up and said, "You talk as if I had the same ideas as you . . . or was on the point of acquiring them . . . If that had been so, I should have offered my services to you myself . . . But as things are—that is, as I neither share, nor wish to share, your ideas—what you ask of me is simply a betrayal of trust."

"Betrayal—nonsense," replied Quadri promptly. "For us, traitors don't exist . . . There are only people who reflect upon the error of their ways and repent . . . I was and still am convinced that you are one of those people."

"You're wrong."

"Forget I said it, then, forget I said it . . . Mademoiselle!" Hurriedly, perhaps to hide his disappointment, Quadri called one of the waitresses and paid the bill. Then they sat silent, Quadri looking out into the room with the air of a calm spectator, Marcello with his back to the room, his eyes downcast. At last he felt a hand on his shoulder and heard

Giulia's slow, quiet voice saying, "Shall we go then? I'm so tired . . ."

Marcello got up at once, saying, "Yes, I think we're all ready for bed." It appeared to him that Lina's face wore a defeated expression and was of an intense pallor; but he attributed the first to the fatigues of the evening and the second to the livid quality of the neon lights. They went out and walked to the car at the far end of the street. Marcello pretended not to hear his wife whisper "Let's sit as we were before," and got in, decisively, beside Quadri. During the whole drive none of the four spoke. The only remark made was when Marcello, about half way, said in a haphazard fashion, "How long will you take to get to Savoy?" and Quadri, without turning his head, answered, "It's a fast car and as I shall be alone and have nothing to do but drive, I think I ought to get to Annecy by nightfall . . . I shall leave at dawn next day . . ."

At the hotel they all got out of the car to say their farewells. Quadri, after hurriedly shaking hands with Marcello and Giulia, went back to the car. Lina dallied a moment to say something to Giulia, and then Giulia said good-bye to her and went into the hotel. For a moment Lina and Marcello were left alone on the pavement. He said, in an embarrassed way, "Till tomorrow, then." "Till tomorrow," she echoed, bowing and smiling in her social manner. Then she turned away from him; and he rejoined Giulia in the hall of the hotel.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

WHEN Marcello awoke and turned his eyes up toward the ceiling, in the dim, uncertain light of half-closed shutters, he remembered immediately that at that hour Quadri was already driving over the roads of France, followed at a short distance by Orlando and his men; and he realized that the visit to Paris was over. The visit was over, he repeated to himself, although the visit had scarcely begun. It was over because, with Quadri's death—which was already, so to speak, paid for—he had brought to a conclusion that period of his life during which he had tried by every possible means to rid himself of the burden of solitude and abnormality with which Lino's death had left him. He had succeeded in this at the price of a crime, or, rather, of what would have been a crime if he had not known how to justify it and give it a meaning. As far as he himself was concerned, he was sure that such justification would not be wanting. As a good husband, a good father, a good citizen, he would see his life slowly but steadily acquiring the completeness it had hitherto lacked; and this too was thanks to Quadri's death which, once and for all, precluded any turning back. So it was that Lino's death, that had been

the first cause of his somber tragedy, would be nullified and canceled out by Quadri's, just as, once upon a time, the expiatory sacrifice of an innocent human victim nullified and canceled out the guilt of a previous crime. But it was not only he himself that was concerned. The justification of his life and of the murder of Quadri did not depend only on him. "The time has come," he argued lucidly, "when others must do their duty too . . . otherwise I shall be left alone, with this dead man on my hands, and in the end I shall have merely added nothing to nothing." The others, as he well knew, were the government he had agreed to serve by means of this murder, the social system that expressed itself in that same government, and the nation itself that accepted the guidance of that social system. It would not be enough to say: "I have done my duty . . . I have acted in this way because I was ordered to do so." Such a justification might suffice for Orlando the Secret Service man, but not for him. What was needed, for him, was the complete success of that government, that social system, that nation; and not merely an external success but an intimate, essential success as well. Only in that way could what was normally considered an ordinary crime become, instead, a positive step in a necessary direction. In other words, there must be brought about, thanks to forces that did not depend on him, a complete transformation of values. Injustice must become justice; treachery, heroism; death, life. At this point he felt the need to express his own position in crude, sarcastic words, and said to himself coldly, "If, in fact, fascism is a failure, if all the blackguards and incompetents and imbeciles in Rome bring the Italian nation to ruin, then I'm nothing but a wretched murderer." But he immediately made a mental correction. "And yet, as things are now, I couldn't have done otherwise."

Giulia, who was still asleep beside him, stirred, and with a slow, strong, gradual movement clasped him tightly, first with her two arms, then with her legs, and laid her head on his chest. Marcello made no resistance, but he put out his arm and took up the little luminous clock on the bed table to look at the time. It was a quarter past nine. If things had gone as Orlando had led him to suppose they would, at this moment at some point or other on some French highway, Quadri's car must be lying abandoned in a ditch with a corpse at the wheel. Giulia murmured, "What time is it?"

"A quarter past nine."

"Ugh, how late it is," she said without moving. "We've slept at least nine hours."

"You see how tired we must have been."

"Aren't we going to Versailles?"

"Yes, of course . . . In fact we ought to get dressed," he said with a sigh, "Signora Quadri will soon be here."

"I'd much rather she wasn't coming . . . She never leaves me in peace, with her love-making."

Marcello said nothing. After a moment Giulia went on: "And what's the program for the next few days?"

Before he could prevent himself, Marcello replied, "We must go home," in a voice that sounded to him positively mournful, from the melancholy he was feeling.

Giulia now roused herself and, pulling back her head and shoulders a little but not letting go of him, asked in an astonished voice, in alarm, "Go home? So soon? We've barely arrived and we've got to go back already?"

"I didn't tell you yesterday," he lied, "because I didn't want to spoil the evening for you . . . But in the afternoon I got a telegram recalling me to Rome."

"Oh, what a pity! . . . what a dreadful pity!" said Giulia

in a good-natured, already resigned tone, "just when I was beginning to enjoy Paris . . . Besides, we haven't seen anything."

"D'you mind very much?" he asked her gently, stroking her head.

"No, but I should have liked to stay a few days at any rate . . . if only to get some idea of Paris."

"We'll come back again."

There was silence. Then Giulia, with a lively movement of her arms and her whole body, pressed up against him and said: "Well, tell me anyhow what we're going to do in the future . . . What's our life going to be?"

"Why d'you want to know that?"

"Never mind," she answered, snuggling up against him. "Because I like so much to talk about the future . . . in bed . . . in the dark."

"Well," began Marcello in a calm, colorless voice, "we go back now to Rome and look for a place to live."

"How big a place?"

"Four or five rooms plus offices . . . Having found it, we buy everything necessary to furnish it."

"I should like a flat on the ground floor," she said in a dreamy voice, "with a garden . . . not a big one . . . but with trees and flowers, so that one could sit out in it when it's fine."

"Nothing could be easier," Marcello agreed. "Then we'll set up house . . . I think I'll have enough money to furnish it completely . . . not with expensive things, of course . . ."

"You must have a nice study of your own," she said.

"Why should I have a study, considering that I work in an office? . . . Better a good big living room."

"Yes, a living room, drawing room and dining room combined. And we'll have a nice bedroom too, shan't we?"

"Yes, of course."

"But none of those dreary old-fashioned beds . . . I want a real proper bedroom, with a proper double bed . . . And tell me . . . we'll have a nice kitchen too?"

"Certainly we'll have a nice kitchen, why not?"

"I want to have a double stove, with gas and electricity . . . And I want a nice refrigerator too . . . If we haven't enough money, these things can be bought by installments. That will make it easier."

"Yes, of course . . . by installments."

"And tell me, what are we going to do in this house?"

"We're going to live in it and be happy."

"I do need so much to be happy," she said, cuddling up even closer to him, "so very much . . . If you knew . . . It seems to me I've needed to be happy ever since I was born."

"Well, we will be happy," said Marcello with almost aggressive firmness.

"And shall we have children?"

"Of course."

"I want *lots* of them," she said with a kind of singsong intonation, "I want one every year, at least for the first four years of our marriage . . . so that then we shall have a family and I want to have a family as quickly as possible . . . It seems to me that one oughtn't to wait, otherwise it may be too late . . . And when one has a family, all the rest comes of itself, doesn't it?"

"Of course, all the rest comes of itself."

She was silent a moment and then asked, "D'you think I'm with child already?"

"How could I know?"

"If I am," she said with a laugh, "it would mean that our child was begotten in the train."

"Would you like that?"

"Yes, it would be a lucky sign for him . . . You never know, he might become a great traveler . . . The first child I want to be a boy . . . then I'd rather the second was a girl . . . I'm sure she'd be very beautiful . . . You're good-looking and I'm not exactly ugly . . . We two certainly ought to have very lovely children."

Marcello said nothing and Giulia went on, "Why are you so silent? Wouldn't you like to have children by me?"

"Of course I should," he replied; and all of a sudden he felt, to his astonishment, two tears spout out of his eyes and trickle down his cheeks. And then two more, hot and scalding, like tears already wept some time long past, that had lain within his eyes to be infused with burning sorrow. He knew that what made him weep was Giulia's talk of happiness of a few minutes before, and yet he was unable to define the reason of it. Perhaps it was because this happiness had been paid for in advance at so dear a price; perhaps because he realized that he would never be able to be happy, not, anyhow, in the simple, affectionate way described by Giulia. With an effort he at last repressed his desire to weep, and, without Giulia's noticing it, wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. Giulia, meanwhile, was embracing him more and more closely, clinging to him desirously with her body, seeking to guide his listless, inattentive hands to caress and enfold her. Then he felt her bend her face toward his and begin kissing him repeatedly on his cheeks and his mouth, on his brow and on his chin, with a kind of frantic, childish eagerness. Finally she whispered to him, in an almost mournful tone, "Why won't you come to me . . . Come and take me," and he seemed to detect in her voice of entreaty something like a reproof for having thought more of his own happiness than of hers. And then, while he was em-

bracing her, penetrating, gently and easily, into her, and while she, beneath him, her head thrown back on the pillow, her eyes closed, was beginning to raise and lower her hips with a regular, composed, vaguely thoughtful motion, like that of a wave rising and falling with the ebb and flow of the tide—at that moment there was a loud knock on the door and a voice called: "Express Messenger!"

"What can it be?" she murmured, panting, half opening her eyes; "don't move . . . What does it matter?" Marcello turned his head and could just see, on the floor in the brighter light near the door, a letter which had been pushed in through the crack. At the same moment Giulia became motionless and rigid beneath him, throwing back her head and breathing deeply and pressing her fingernails into his arms. She twisted her head on the pillow first one way and then the other, and murmured, "Kill me."

Irrationally, Marcello recalled Lino's cry, "Kill me like a dog!" He was conscious of a horrible anxiety sweeping over him. He waited for some time, until Giulia's hands fell back upon the bed; then he turned on the lamp, got up, fetched the letter and came and lay down again beside his wife. Giulia had now curled up with her back to him and her eyes closed. Marcello looked at the letter before putting it down on the edge of the bed, close to her mouth which was still open and panting. The envelope was addressed to "Madame Giulia Clerici" in an obviously feminine hand. "A letter from Signora Quadri," he said.

Giulia, without opening her eyes, murmured, "Give it to me."

A long silence followed. The letter was lying level with Giulia's mouth, in the full light of the lamp. Giulia, relaxed and motionless, appeared to be asleep. Then she sighed,

opened her eyes, and taking hold of the corner of the letter in one hand, tore open the envelope with her teeth, pulled out the sheet of paper and read it.

Marcello saw her smile; then she murmured, "They say that in love the one who flies is the winner . . . Since I treated her badly yesterday evening, she informs me that she has changed her mind and has gone off this morning with her husband . . . She hopes I'll join her . . . *Bon voyage.*"

"She's gone?" repeated Marcello.

"Yes, she left at seven this morning with her husband, for Savoy . . . And you know why she's gone? You remember yesterday evening, when I danced with her the second time? It was I who asked her to dance and she was pleased because she hoped I was at last going to take some notice of her . . . Well, I told her, on the contrary, with the greatest frankness, that she must give up all idea of me . . . and that if she went on, I should cease to see her altogether, and that I loved no one but you, and that she must leave me in peace, and that she ought to be ashamed of herself . . . In fact I said so many things to her that she almost burst into tears . . . That's why she's gone today . . . You see how she calculated?—*I* go away so that *you* can join me again . . . She'll have to wait a bit."

"Yes, she'll have to wait a bit," repeated Marcello.

"In any case I'm very glad she's gone," resumed Giulia. "She was so persistent and tiresome . . . As for joining her again, don't let's even speak of it . . . I don't want ever to see that woman again."

"You won't ever see her again," said Marcello.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE room at the Ministry in which Marcello worked looked out on to a lesser courtyard. It was a very small room, unsymmetrical in shape, and contained nothing but a desk and a couple of shelves. It was at the end of a corridor that led nowhere, and was a long way from the waiting room. To get to it Marcello used a back staircase that came out at the rear of the building into an unfrequented lane. One morning, a week after his return from Paris, he was sitting at his table. In spite of the great heat he had neither taken off his jacket nor undone his tie, as many of his colleagues did. He had the punctilious habit of never altering in the office the appearance that he wore outside of it. Fully dressed, therefore, his neck enclosed in a high, tight starched collar, he started examining the Italian and foreign newspapers before getting down to work. That morning again, though six days had now passed, his first glance was for the Quadri murder. He noticed that both news and headlines were much reduced, a sure sign that the investigations had made no progress. A couple of French newspapers of the Left gave the whole story of the crime over again, punctuating

their accounts with interpretations of certain odd or significant details—that Quadri had been stabbed to death in the depths of a wood; that his wife, on the other hand, had been hit by three revolver bullets at the side of the road and her body then dragged into the wood beside her husband's; that the car had also been taken into the wood and hidden among the bushes. The care with which the bodies and the car had been concealed among the trees, a long way from the road, had prevented discovery for two days.

The newspapers of the Left gave it out as a certainty that the couple had been killed by assassins specially sent from Italy. Some of the papers of the Right, on the other hand, took the risk of giving—though in a questioning manner—the official account as given in the Italian papers—that they had been murdered by anti-Fascist associates owning to divergences of opinion about the conduct of the war in Spain. Marcello threw aside the newspapers and took up a French illustrated review. He was immediately struck by a photograph on the second page that formed part of a full journalistic account of the crime. The picture carried the title: "The Tragedy of the Forest of Gevaudan," and must have been taken at the moment of the discovery or soon afterward. It showed the undergrowth of a wood with straight tree trunks and shaggy branches, bright patches of sunlight between the tree trunks, and on the ground, half hidden in the long grass difficult to see at a first glance in the confused variation of light and shade, the two bodies. Quadri was lying on his back, and of him nothing could be seen but the shoulders and the head, and of the latter only the chin with the black line of a cut across the throat. Lina was lying half across her husband, and her whole person could be seen. Marcello calmly put down his lighted cigarette on the edge of the ash tray, took up a magnifying

glass and scrutinized the photograph with care. Although it was gray and out of focus and indistinct because of the patches of sun and shade in the undergrowth, it showed Lina's body quite recognizably—at the same time both slender and fully formed, both pure and sensual, both beautiful and bizarre, with the broad shoulders below the delicate, thin neck, the full bosom above the wasplike slimness of the waist, the wide hips and the long, elegant legs. Part of her body and her widely spread skirt covered the body of her husband, and it looked as though she were trying to whisper into his ear as she lay there, twisted to one side, her face buried in the grass, her mouth against his cheek.

For a long time Marcello looked at the photograph through the magnifying glass, seeking to examine every line, every shadow, every detail of it. He felt that this picture, filled with a stillness that went beyond the mechanical stillness of the photograph had attained the last, final stillness of death, breathed an atmosphere of enviable peace. The photograph, it seemed to him, was full of the utterly profound silence that must have followed the terrible, lightning-like suddenness of the death agony. A few moments before, all had been confusion, violence, terror, hatred, hope, despair; a few moments, and all was finished, hushed. He remembered that the two bodies had lain for a long time in the undergrowth, almost two days; and he pictured to himself how the sun must have warmed them for many hours and gathered about them the humming life of insects, and how it must then have gone away, slowly leaving them to the silent darkness of the gentle summer night. The dews of night had wept upon their cheeks, the faint wind had murmured in the highest branches and in the bushes of the undergrowth. With sunrise, the lights and shadows of the day had returned, as if to an appointed meeting place, to play over the two figures as they

lay there motionless. Rejoicing in the freshness and pure splendor of the morning, a bird had perched on a branch to sing its song. A bee had circled round Lina's head, a flower had opened beside Quadri's thrown-back forehead. As they lay there silent and still, the chattering waters of the brooks that wound through the forest had spoken to them, the inhabitants of the wood—stealthy squirrels, bounding rabbits—had moved about them. And all the time, beneath them, the earth on which they lay had slowly taken the impression, in its soft bed of grass and moss, of the stiff forms of their bodies, had been preparing, in answer to their mute request, to receive them into its lap.

He started at a knock on the door, threw away the review and called, "Come in!" The door opened slowly and for a moment Marcello could see no one. Then, looking cautiously through the opening, appeared the honest, peaceable, broad face of the Secret Service agent Orlando.

"May I come in, sir?"

"Of course, Orlando," said Marcello in an official tone of voice, "come in. . . Have you something to tell me?"

Orlando came in, closed the door, and walked forward, staring hard at Marcello. And then, for the first time, Marcello noticed that everything about that florid, heated face was good-natured—everything except the eyes, which, small and deep-set below the bald forehead, glittered in a singular manner. "How odd," thought Marcello as he looked at him, "that I hadn't noticed before." He made a sign to Orlando to sit down and the latter obeyed without a word, still staring at him with those brilliant eyes. "Cigarette?" suggested Marcello, holding out his case.

"Thank you, sir," said the other man, taking a cigarette. There was silence for a moment. Then Orlando blew some

smoke from his mouth, looked for an instant at the lighted end of his cigarette, and said, "D'you know, sir, what is the most curious thing about the Quadri affair?"

"No, what?"

"That it wasn't necessary."

"How d'you mean?"

"What I mean is, that on my way back, as soon as I had crossed the frontier, I went to see Gabrio, at S., to report to him. D'you know what the first thing he said to me was?—'Did you get the counterorder?' . . . I asked him, 'What counterorder?' . . . 'The counterorder,' he said, 'canceling your mission' . . . 'And why should it be canceled?' I asked . . . 'Because,' he said, 'they've suddenly discovered, in Rome, that at this moment an understanding with France would be useful and so they think this mission might spoil the negotiations' . . . So I said: 'I didn't receive any counterorder before I left Paris, so clearly it was sent too late. . . Anyhow the job was done, as you'll be able to see in the papers tomorrow morning' . . . When I told him this he began shouting, 'You beasts, you've ruined me, this may upset Franco-Italian relations at a very delicate moment in international politics, you're criminals, what am I to say to Rome?' 'You must tell them the truth,' I answered quite calmly, 'that the counterorder was sent too late' . . . You see, sir? Such a lot of trouble, two people killed, and then it wasn't necessary; in fact it's done more harm than good."

Marcello said nothing. Orlando inhaled another mouthful of smoke, and then, in the naïve, self-satisfied, emphatic way of an uneducated man who likes to fill his mouth with solemn words, he pronounced, "It was the will of Fate."

There was silence again. Orlando went on, "But that's the last time I take on a mission of this kind. . . Next time—

nothing doing. . . Why, Gabrio was shouting: 'You're beasts' . . . and that isn't true at all. . . We're men, not beasts. . ."

Marcello stamped out his half-smoked cigarette and lit another. Orlando continued, "It's all very well, but there are some things I don't like. . . Cirrincione, to mention only one of them. . ."

"Who's Cirrincione?"

"One of the men who were with me. . . Immediately after the job was done, I happened to turn round, in the middle of all the confusion, and what do I see?—him, licking his dagger. . . I shouted at him, 'What are you doing? Are you mad?' And he says to me, 'Hunchback's blood brings luck' . . . D'you see what I mean? Barbarian. . . I damn near shot him."

Marcello lowered his eyes and automatically began rearranging the papers on his desk. Orlando shook his head in a deprecatory manner and resumed, "But what I disliked most of all was the business of the lady, who had nothing to do with it and shouldn't have been killed at all. . . But she threw herself in front of her husband, to protect him, and got two of the revolver shots that were meant for him. . . He escaped into the wood, where that barbarian Cirrincione caught up with him. . . She was still alive, so I had to give her another one and put an end to it. . . She was pluckier than plenty of men I've known. . . ."

Marcello looked up at him, as though to intimate that the interview was over. Orlando understood and rose to his feet. But he did not go away at once. He put his two hands on the desk, gazed for some time at Marcello with those glittering eyes of his, and then, in the same emphatic manner in which, shortly before, he had pronounced the word "Fate," said, "All for Family and Fatherland, sir."

Then, suddenly, Marcello knew where he had seen those peculiar, glittering eyes before. Those eyes held the same expression as the eyes of his father, shut up in the clinic for the insane. Coldly, he said, "Perhaps the Fatherland wasn't demanding all that much."

"If it wasn't demanding it," asked Orlando, leaning forward slightly toward him and raising his voice, "why did they make us do it?"

Marcello hesitated, and then said, "You've done your duty, Orlando, and that should be enough." He saw the Secret Service agent, half mortified, half approving, give a slight, deferential bow. Then, after a moment's silence, for a reason that he could not have explained—possibly to relieve, in some way, that distress which was so like his own—he added gently, "Have you any children, Orlando?"

"Why, of course I have, sir . . . five of them." Orlando drew out a big, tattered billfold, took from it a photograph that he handed to Marcello, who took it and looked at it. It showed five children between thirteen and six years old, standing in a row in order of size, three girls and two boys, all in their best clothes, the girls in white, the boys in sailor suits. All five of them, Marcello observed, had round, peaceable, sensible faces very like their father's. "They're in the country with their mother," said Orlando, taking back the photograph Marcello handed to him; "the biggest girl's already working as a dressmaker."

"They're fine children, and very like you," said Marcello.

"Thank you, sir. . . Well, good-bye then, sir." Orlando, cheerful again, bowed twice as he retreated backward. At that moment the door opened and Giulia appeared. "Thank you again, sir, thank you again." Orlando stood aside to let Giulia pass, and then disappeared.

Gilia came in and said immediately, "I was passing this way and I thought I'd pay you a visit. . . How are you?"

"I'm all right," said Marcello.

Standing in front of the desk she looked at him, hesitating, full of doubt and apprehension. Finally she said, "Don't you think you're working too hard?"

"No," answered Marcello, throwing a quick glance at the open window. "Why?"

"You look tired." Giulia walked round the desk and then stood still for a little, leaning against the arm of the chair and looking at the newspapers scattered over the table. Then she asked, "No news?"

"About what?"

"In the papers, about the Quadri affair."

"No, nothing."

After a moment's silence, she said, "I feel more and more certain that it was men of his own party who killed him. What d'you think about it?"

It was the official version of the crime, handed out to the Italian newspapers from the propaganda offices the same morning that the news had arrived from Paris. Giulia, Marcello noticed, had mentioned it with a kind of determined good will, as though she were hoping to convince herself. He replied drily, "I don't know. . . It might be so."

"I'm convinced of it," she repeated resolutely. And then, after a moment of hesitation, she went on ingenuously: "Sometimes I think that if I hadn't treated Quadri's wife so badly that evening, at the night club, she would have stayed in Paris and she wouldn't be dead. . . And then I have a feeling of remorse. . . But what could I do? It was her fault, because she wouldn't give me a moment's peace."

Marcello wondered whether Giulia had any suspicion of the

part he had taken in the killing of Quadri. After thinking it over, he decided against the possibility. No love, he felt, could have stood up to such a discovery. Giulia was telling the truth: she felt remorse for Lina's death, because—though in a perfectly innocent manner—she had been the indirect cause of it. He wanted to reassure her, but could find no better word than the one already pronounced, with such emphasis, by Orlando. "You mustn't feel remorse," he said, putting his arm round her waist and drawing her toward him, "it was the will of Fate."

Lightly stroking his head, she answered, "I don't believe in Fate. . . The real reason was that I love you. . . If I didn't love you—who knows?—I might not have treated her so badly, and she wouldn't have gone away and she wouldn't be dead. . . What is there fatal about that?"

Marcello remembered Lino, first cause of all the troubles of his life, and explained to her, thoughtfully, "When one says Fate it's exactly those things that one means, love and all the rest. . . You couldn't help acting as you did, nor could she, indeed, help going away with her husband."

"So we're not really able to do anything?" asked Giulia in a dreamy voice, looking at the papers scattered over the desk.

Marcello hesitated, and then replied, with profound bitterness, "Yes, we're able to know that we're not able to do anything."

"And what's the use of that?"

"It's useful to ourselves, the next time. . . Or for others who come after us."

She walked away from him with a sigh and went to the door. "Don't forget to be in good time today," she said as she stood in the doorway; "Mummy's got a specially good lunch for us. . . And remember you mustn't make any appointments

for the afternoon. . . We've got to go and look at those flats." She waved to him and vanished.

Left alone, Marcello took a pair of scissors, carefully cut out the photograph from the French review, put it in a drawer with some other papers and locked the drawer. At that same moment the piercing wail of the noonday siren came down into the courtyard from the burning sky above. Immediately afterward church bells, near and far, began to ring.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

EVENING had fallen, and Marcello, who had spent the day lying on the bed smoking and meditating, rose and went to the window. Black in the greenish light of the summer dusk rose the surrounding blocks of flats, each with its bare cement courtyard adorned with small green flower beds and hedges of clipped myrtle. Here and there a window shone red, and in pantries and kitchens one could see menservants in striped working jackets and cooks in white aprons attending to their household duties among painted cupboards or electric stoves. Marcello looked up above the flat roofs of the buildings to where the last purple vapors of sunset were vanishing in the darkening sky; then he looked down again, and saw a car coming into a courtyard and stopping, and the driver getting out, together with a big white dog which at once started running about the flower beds, whining and barking with joy. This was a wealthy quarter, newly arisen in the last few years, and, looking at those courtyards and windows, nobody would have thought that a war had been going on for four years and that, on that very day, a government that had lasted for twenty years had fallen. Nobody except himself, thought Marcello, and those who found themselves in the same posi-

tion as he. There flashed upon him, for a moment, the image of a divine rod hanging over the great city as it lay peacefully beneath the clear sky, striking a family here, a family there, bringing terror and dismay and affliction upon them; while their neighbors remained unharmed. His own family was among those smitten, as he knew and as he had foreseen ever since the beginning of the war: a family just like other families, with the same affections and the same intimate ways, a perfectly normal family, possessing the normality that he had sought after with such tenacity for so many years and which was now revealed as a purely external thing entirely made up of abnormalities.

He remembered how he had said to his wife, on the day war broke out in Europe, "If I was logical, I ought to commit suicide today"; and he remembered also the terror that those words had aroused in her. It was as though she had known what they concealed, not merely that she foresaw an unfavorable outcome to the conflict. Once again he had wondered whether Giulia knew the truth about him and about the part he had taken in Quadri's death; and once again it seemed to him impossible that she could know, although, from certain indications, one might well suppose the contrary.

He realized now, with perfect clarity, that he had, as they say, backed the wrong horse; but why he had backed it in that way, and why the horse had not won—this, apart from the most obviously established facts, was not clear to him. He would have liked to be certain that all that had happened had had to happen; that, in fact, he could not have backed any other horse nor arrived at any different result: and he had a greater need of this certainty than of any liberation from a remorse that he did not feel. For him, the only remorse possible was for his mistake—that is, for having done what he had done without any absolute and fatal necessity. For

having, in fact—either deliberately or involuntarily—ignored the possibility of doing things that were entirely different. But if he could have the certainty that this was not true—well, then it seemed to him that he could be at peace with himself, even if only in his usual dim, colorless manner. In other words, he thought, he must be sure of having recognized his own destiny and of having accepted it as it was, as a thing useful to others and to himself perhaps in a merely negative way, but useful nevertheless.

He was comforted, meanwhile, in the midst of his doubts by the idea that, even if he had been wrong—a possibility that could not be excluded—he had yet staked more than anyone else, more than all those who found themselves in the same position as himself. This was a comfort to his pride, the only comfort now left him. Others would be able, tomorrow, to change their ideas, their party, their lives, their very characters. For him, however, this was impossible—not merely with respect to others, but to his own self as well. He had done what he had done for reasons entirely of his own, regardless of any communion with other people. To change now, even if it had been permitted him, would mean annihilation of himself. And that, of all the many methods of extinction, was the one he most wished to avoid.

At this point it occurred to him that, if he had been wrong, his first and greatest mistake had been in wishing to escape from his own abnormality and in seeking some kind of normality through which to communicate with other people. This mistake had had its origin in a powerful instinct. Unfortunately the normality that this instinct had happened to light upon was nothing more than an empty shell, inside which everything was abnormal and motiveless. At the first knock, this shell had broken to pieces; and the instinct, so well justified and so human, had turned him from a victim into an execu-

tioner. His mistake had been not so much that he had killed Quadri, as that he had attempted, with inadequate means, to obliterate the original flaw in his own life. But, he wondered again, might it perhaps have been possible for things to have gone differently?

No, it would not have been possible, he thought, answering his own question. Lino had had to set a trap for his innocence, and he, to defend himself, had had to kill him, and afterward, in order to rid himself of his resulting sense of abnormality, had had to seek after normality in the way he had done; and in order to obtain this normality had had to pay a price equivalent to the burden of abnormality of which he intended to rid himself; and that price had been the death of Quadri. Everything, therefore, though freely accepted, had been ordained by fate, just as everything had been at the same time both right and wrong.

All these things were not so much thoughts as feelings, of which he was acutely and painfully conscious, with a sensation of anguish he rejected and defied. He wanted to be calm and detached in face of the disaster to his own life, as though he were watching some gloomy but remote spectacle. His sensation of anguish made him suspect the existence of a panic relationship between himself and outside events, in spite of the clearness with which he forced himself to examine them. In any case it was not easy, at this moment, to distinguish between clearness and fear; and perhaps the best course was to maintain, as always, a decorous, impassive attitude. After all, he said to himself, almost without irony and as though adding up the total of his own modest ambitions, he had nothing to lose—provided that loss was understood to mean the sacrifice of his mediocre position as a government official, of this home that had to be paid for by installments in twenty-five years, of the car, which also had to be paid for within two

years, and of a few other oddments of comfort that he had felt Giulia must be allowed to have. He had really nothing to lose. And if they had come at that moment to arrest him, the scantiness of the material advantages he had derived from his position would have astonished even his enemies.

He left the window and turned back into the room. It contained, as Giulia had wished, a large double bed, and the furniture was of shining, dark mahogany with bronze handles and ornaments, in a more or less "Empire" style. It occurred to him that this furniture had been bought on the installment plan too, and that he had finished paying for it only the year before. "The whole of our life," he said to himself sarcastically, taking his jacket from the chair and putting it on, "is on the installment plan . . . but the last ones are the biggest and we shall never manage to pay them." He pushed back the rumpled bedside rug with his foot and went out of the room.

He went along the passage to a half-closed door at the other end, through which a little light was visible. It was his daughter's bedroom, and he paused a moment as he went in at the door and saw, with incredulity, the familiar, everyday scene that faced him. It was a small room, done up in the pretty, gaily colored style suitable to rooms in which children sleep and live. The furniture was painted pink, the curtains were pale blue, and the walls were covered with a paper that had a design of little baskets of flowers. On the carpet, also pink, were scattered untidily a number of dolls of varying sizes, as well as other toys. His wife was sitting beside the bed, in which lay Lucilla, their child. Giulia, who was talking to the child, turned slightly as he came in and cast a lingering glance at him, without, however, saying anything. Marcello took one of the little painted chairs and sat down beside the bed. "Good evening, Daddy," said the little girl.

"Good evening, Lucilla," replied Marcello, looking at her.

She was a dark, delicate-looking child with a round face, enormous, melting eyes, and very fine features—features so excessively dainty that they looked almost affected. He did not know why, but at that moment she seemed to him to be too pretty and also too conscious of her own prettiness, in a manner that might well be a first sign of innocent coquettishness and that reminded him, unpleasingly, of his mother, whom the child strongly resembled. This coquettishness was noticeable in the way she rolled her big, velvety eyes when speaking to him or to her mother—an effect that was indeed odd in a child of six; and also in the extreme, almost unbelievable assurance of her conversation. In her blue nightgown, all lace and puffed sleeves, she was sitting up in bed with hands clasped, in the midst of her evening prayers which were interrupted by the entrance of her father. "Come on, Lucilla, don't sit there dreaming," said her mother in a good-natured way. "Come on, say your prayers after me."

"I'm not dreaming," said the child, turning her eyes up to the ceiling with an impatient, prim grimace. "It was you who stopped when Daddy came in . . . so I stopped too."

"You're quite right," said Giulia, unmoved, "but you know the prayer perfectly well. . . You could have gone on by yourself. . . When you're bigger, I won't always be there to help you. . . But you'll still have to say it."

"Look what a lot of time you make me waste . . . and I'm so tired," said the child, raising her shoulders slightly but keeping her hands clasped. "You start arguing, and I could have finished saying my prayers by now."

"Come along," repeated Giulia, smiling now in spite of herself, "let's begin again from the beginning: 'Hail Mary, full of grace.' "

The little girl repeated in a drawling voice, "Hail Mary, full of grace."

"The Lord is with thee, blessed art thou amongst women."

"The Lord is with thee, blessed art thou amongst women."

"And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus."

"And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus."

"Can I rest a moment?" asked the child at this point.

"Why?" asked Giulia. "Are you tired already?"

"You've kept me like this for an hour, with my hands clasped," said the child, pulling her hands apart and looking at her father. "When Daddy came in we'd already said half the prayer." She rubbed her arms with her hands, making a disdainful, flirtatious display of her own weariness. Then she clasped her hands again, and said, "I'm ready now."

"Holy Mary, mother of God," Giulia resumed quietly.

"Holy Mary, mother of God," repeated the child.

"Pray for us sinners."

"Pray for us sinners."

"Now and at the hour of our death."

"Now and at the hour of our death."

"So be it."

"So be it."

"But, you, Daddy, don't you ever say your prayers?" asked the child, without any transition.

"We say them in the evening before we go to bed," replied Giulia hurriedly. The child, however, was looking at Marcello with a questioning and incredulous air. He hastened to confirm what Giulia had said. "Of course, every evening before we go to bed."

"Now lie down and go to sleep," said Giulia, rising and trying to make the child lie flat. She managed to do this, but not without some difficulty, for Lucilla did not seem at all disposed to go to sleep; then she pulled up to the child's chin the single sheet which was the only covering on the bed.

"I'm hot," said the child, kicking at the sheet. "I'm so hot."

"Tomorrow we're going to Granny's and you wont be hot any more," answered Giulia.

"Where's Granny?"

"Up in the hills. . . It's cool there."

"But where?"

"I've told you dozens of times—Tagliacozzo. . . It's a cool place and we're going to stay there all the summer."

"But won't the airplanes come there?"

"The airplanes won't come any more."

"Why?"

"Because the war's over."

"And why is the war over?"

"Because two and two don't make three," said Giulia brusquely but not ill-humoredly. "Now that's enough questions. . . Go to sleep, because we're leaving early tomorrow morning. . . I'm just going to fetch your medicine." She went out, leaving father and daughter alone together.

"Daddy," asked the little girl immediately, sitting up in bed again, "d'you remember the cat belonging to the people who live underneath?"

"Yes," replied Marcello, rising from his chair and coming across to sit on the edge of the bed.

"It's had four kittens."

"Well?"

"The little girls' governess told me that they can give me one of the kittens. . . Can I have it? I could take it to Tagliacozzo."

"But when were these kittens born?" asked Marcello.

"The day before yesterday."

"Then it's impossible," said Marcello, stroking his daughter's head. "The kittens must stay with their mother until they can take milk. . . You can have it when you come back from Tagliacozzo."

"Supposing we don't come back from Tagliacozzo?"

"Why shouldn't we come back? We're coming back at the end of the summer," replied Marcello, twisting his fingers in his daughter's soft brown hair.

"Ooo, you're hurting me," wailed the child instantly, at the first touch.

Marcello let go of her hair and said, with a smile, "Why d'you say I hurt you? . . . You know it's not true."

"But you *did* hurt me," she replied emphatically. She put her hands up to her forehead, in a willful, feminine sort of way. "Now I shall have a terrible headache."

"Then I shall pull your ears," said Marcello jokingly. Delicately he lifted the hair over the little round, pink ear and gave it the faintest pull, shaking it like a bell. "Ooo, ooo, ooo," cried the child in a shrill voice, pretending to be hurt, a slight blush spreading over her face, "you're hurting me."

"You see what a little liar you are," said Marcello reprovingly, letting go of her ear. "You know, you oughtn't to tell lies."

"That time," she said sagaciously, "I promise you did really hurt me."

"D'you want me to give you one of your dolls for the night?" asked Marcello, looking down at the carpet where the toys lay scattered.

She cast a quietly scornful glance at the dolls and answered in a self-possessed manner, "If you like."

"If *I* like?" asked Marcello, smiling. "You talk as if it was *you* who were giving *me* a pleasure. . . Don't you like having a doll to sleep with?"

"Yes, I do," she conceded. "Give me—" she hesitated, looking down at the carpet, "give me that one with the pink dress."

Marcello also looked down. "They've all got pink dresses," he said.

"There's pink and pink," said the child, in an impatient, know-all kind of way. "The pink of the doll I want is exactly the same as the pink of the pink roses on the balcony."

"Is this the one?" asked Marcello, taking up from the floor the finest and largest of the dolls.

"You see, you don't know anything about it," she said severely. She jumped out of bed, ran barefoot to one corner of the carpet, and picking up an extremely ugly rag doll with a squashed and blackened face, hurried back to bed again, saying, "There you are!" This time she lay down quietly under the sheet, on her back, her rosy, placid face pressed affectionately against the dirty, surprised-looking face of the doll. Giulia came in again with a bottle and a spoon.

"Come along," she said, going up to the bed, "take your medicine." The little girl obeyed promptly. She sat half up in the bed, stretching out her face with her mouth open, like a little bird about to be fed. Giulia put the spoon into her mouth, then tilted it quickly to let the liquid run out. The child lay down again, saying, "How nasty it is!"

"Well, good night," said Giulia, stooping to kiss her daughter.

"Good night, Mummy, good night, Daddy," said the child in her shrill voice. Marcello kissed her on the cheek and then followed his wife. Giulia turned out the light and closed the door.

In the passage, she half turned toward her husband and said, "I think it's ready." Marcello then noticed, for the first time, in that revealing dimness, that Giulia's eyes were swollen as if with weeping. His visit to the child had cheered him; but when he saw his wife's eyes, he began to be afraid again that he would not be able to appear as calm and firm as he wished. Giulia had gone on in front of him into the dining room, an extremely small room with a little round table and

a sideboard. The table was laid, the central light was burning, and through the open window came a radio voice describing, in the breathless, triumphal style of a football commentator, the fall of the Fascist government. The maid came in, served the soup, and went out again. They started eating, slowly and with measured movements. The radio suddenly became frantic. The announcer was now describing, in exalted terms and a feverish tone of voice, how a huge crowd was gathering throughout the streets of the city, acclaiming the King. "How disgusting!" said Giulia, putting down her spoon and looking towards the window.

"Why disgusting?"

"Until yesterday they were clapping their hands at Mussolini. . . A few days ago they were applauding the Pope because they hoped he would save them from air raids. . . Today they acclaim the King, who threw Mussolini out."

Marcello said nothing. Giulia's opinions and reactions in the matter of public affairs were so well known to him that he could always mentally anticipate them. They were the opinions and reactions of an extremely simple person, entirely devoid of curiosity as to the deeper causes from which public events originate, and guided mainly by personal and emotional standards. They finished their soup without speaking while the radio continued to blare out a torrent of words. Then, after the maid had brought in the second course, it ceased, and there was silence, and with the silence came back the suffocating, sultry feeling of the airless summer night. They looked at each other and then Giulia asked, "What will you do now?"

Marcello replied briefly, "I shall do the same as all the other people who find themselves in my position. . . There are quite a lot of us in Italy who believed in it."

Giulia hesitated before speaking. Then she went on, slow-

ly, "No, I mean, what will you do about the Quadri business?"

So she knew, then; perhaps she had always known, after all. Marcello felt his heart fail him at her words, just as it would have failed him ten years earlier if someone had asked him, "What will you do now about the Lino business?" His answer, at that time—if he had the gift of prophecy—would have been, "Kill Quadri." But now? He put down the fork at the side of his plate, and as soon as he could be sure that his voice would not tremble, answered, "I don't understand what you're talking about."

He saw her lower her eyes, with a grimace as though she were weeping. Then she said, in a slow, sad voice, "Lina told me in Paris—perhaps because she wanted to get me away from you—that you were in the Secret Police."

"And what did you answer her?"

"That it didn't matter to me if you were . . . that I was your wife and that I loved you, whatever you did . . . that if you were doing that, it meant you thought it was the right thing to do."

Marcello said nothing, deeply moved, in spite of himself, by this obtuse, unshakable loyalty. Giulia continued, in a hesitating voice, "But then, when Quadri and Lina were killed, I was terrified that you had something to do with it . . . and I've never been able to stop thinking about it. . . But I never said anything to you because, as you'd never told me anything about your profession, I thought there was all the more reason why I couldn't speak about *this*."

"And what d'you think now?" asked Marcello after a moment's silence.

"What do I think?" said Giulia, raising her eyes and looking at him. Marcello saw that her eyes were shining, and he knew that those tears already gave him his answer. She added,

however, with an effort, "You yourself told me in Paris that the visit to Quadri was very important for your career. . . So I think it may be true."

He answered at once, "It *is* true."

He realized, simultaneously, that Giulia had been hoping, up to the very last moment, that he would contradict her. And indeed, at his words, as though they had been a signal, she threw her head down on the table, buried her face in her arm and started sobbing. Marcello got up, went over to the door and turned the key. Then he went up to her, and without bending down placed his hand on her hair and said, "If you like, we'll separate, from tomorrow on. . . I'll take you and the child to Tagliacozzo and then I'll go away and you needn't see me any more. . . D'you think that would be the best thing?"

Giulia at once stopped sobbing—just as though, it seemed to him, she had not been able to believe her own ears. Then, from the hollow of her arm, where her face was hidden, came her voice, sad and surprised, "Whatever do you mean? Separate? . . . It's not that . . . but I'm so frightened for you. . . What will they do to you now?"

So Giulia, he said to himself, felt no horror of him, nor did she feel regret for the deaths of Quadri and Lina; it was merely fear on his behalf, fear for his life, for his future. Such insensibility, coupled with such love, affected him strangely; it was like going upstairs in the dark and lifting your foot, thinking to find another step, and instead finding only emptiness because you have reached a landing. He had, in reality, foreseen and even hoped for a feeling of horror and a severe verdict from her. Instead of which, he found only the usual blind, loyal love. Somewhat impatiently, he said, "They won't do anything to me. . . There are no proofs . . . and in any case I was only carrying out orders." He hesitated a moment, feel-

ing a kind of bashfulness, mixed with repugnance, for the commonplace remark; then, with an effort, concluded, "I only did my duty, just as a soldier would."

Giulia quickly snatched at this worn and hackneyed phrase which, not so long ago, had not sufficed to tranquillize even Orlando, the Secret Service man. "Yes, I thought of that," she said, lifting her head and then seizing his hand and kissing it frantically, "I always said to myself, 'Marcello, after all, is just like a soldier. . . Soldiers, also, kill because they're ordered to do so. . . It's no faut of his if they make him do certain things. . .' But don't you really think they'll come and take you away? . . . I'm sure the people who gave you the orders will escape . . . and that you, on the other hand, you who have nothing to do with it and who only did your duty, will be the one to suffer. . . ." After having kissed the back of his hand she turned it over and started kissing the palm with equal fury.

"Don't worry," said Marcello, stroking her head, "for the present they'll have other things to do besides looking for me."

"But people are so dreadful. . . If there's even just one person who hates you . . . they'll denounce you. . . Besides, it's always like that. The big people, the ones who give orders and who've made millions, get away; while the little ones like you, who have done their duty and haven't saved a penny, are the ones who suffer. . . Oh Marcello, I'm so frightened."

"You mustn't be frightened, everything will come right."

"Ah, but I know it won't come right. I feel it. . . And I'm so tired." Giulia spoke now with her face pressed against his hand, but no longer kissing it. "After Lucilla arrived, although I knew what your profession was, I used to think: now I'm properly established, I've got a baby, a husband that I love, I've got a home and a family, I'm happy, truly happy. . . It was the first time in my life that I'd been happy and it

seemed too good to be true. . . I could hardly believe it . . . and I was always so much afraid that everything would come to an end and that the happiness wouldn't last. . . And indeed it hasn't lasted, and now we've got to run away. . . And you'll lose your job and goodness knows what they'll do to you. . . And that poor little creature will be worse off than if she was an orphan. . . And everything will have to be started all over again. . . And perhaps it won't even be possible to start again and our family life will be broken up." She burst into tears and buried her face in her arm again.

All of a sudden Marcello recalled the image that had flashed across his mind earlier—the divine rod pitilessly smiting his whole family, himself, the guilty one, and his wife, and child who were innocent, and he shuddered at the thought. There was a knock at the door and he shouted to the servant that they had finished and didn't need her any more. Then, bending down towards Giulia, he said gently, "Please don't go on crying, and don't worry. . . Our family life won't be broken up. . . We'll go away to America, or to Argentina, and make a new life for ourselves. . . We'll have a home there, and I'll be there, and Lucilla. . . Be brave, and you'll see everything will be all right."

Giulia now raised her tear-stained face toward him, and, filed with sudden hope, said, "We'll go to Argentina. . . But when can we go?"

"As soon as possible. . . As soon as the war's really over."

"And in the meantime?"

"In the meantime we'll get away from Rome and go and stay at Tagliacozzo. . . No one will look for us there. . . You'll see, everything will be all right."

Giulia seemed cheered by these words, and particularly, Marcello thought, as he saw her rise and blow her nose, by the firm tone in which they had been pronounced. "I'm sorry,"

she said, "it's silly of me. . . I ought to be helping you, and all I can do is to cry like a fool." She began clearing the table, taking the dishes and stacking them on the sideboard.

Marcello walked over to the window and, leaning on the sill, looked out. Through the opaque glass panes in the building opposite, floor after floor, right up to the sky, the staircase lights shone silently. In the deep cement courtyards the shadows thickened, black as coal. The night was still and hot, and even if one listened carefully the only sound to be heard was the hissing of a garden hose with which, down in the darkness of the courtyard, someone was watering the flower beds. Marcello turned and said, "Shall we take the car and drive into town?"

"Why?" she asked. "What's the point of it? . . . Goodness knows what the crowds must be like. . ."

"You could witness," he replied almost lightly, "the fall of a dictatorship."

"There's Lucilla. . . I can't leave her alone. . . Supposing the airplanes come?"

"Don't worry, they won't come tonight."

"But why go into town?" she suddenly protested. "Really I don't understand you. . . D'you want to *make* yourself suffer? . . . What pleasure is there in it?"

"You stay, then," he said. "I'll go alone."

"No, then I'll come too," she said at once. "If anything happens to you, I'd rather be there. . . After all, the maid can see to the child."

"But don't be afraid . . . the planes won't come tonight."

"I'm going to change," she said, leaving the room.

Left alone, Marcello crossed over to the window again. There was somebody going down the stairs in the opposite building,—a man. The dark outline of his figure could be seen through the opaque window panes, descending slowly

from floor to floor. He walked down in a self-possessed sort of way, to judge by the slenderness of his outline. He must be a young man thought Marcello enviously, he was whistling. Then the radio started to blare again. Marcello heard the usual voice winding up, as if at the end of a speech, with the words, ". . . the war continues." It was the message of the new government, that he had already heard shortly before. He took out his case and lit a cigarette.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE suburban streets were deserted, silent, dark, as though dead, like the extremities of some large body whose blood has suddenly collected all in one spot. But as the car drew nearer to the center of the city Marcello and Giulia saw more and more groups of people gesticulating and shouting. At a crossroad Marcello slowed down and stopped while a line of trucks went past, packed with boys and young women waving flags and placards with slogans on them. These overloaded, flag-decked trucks with people clinging to the mudguards and the footboards were greeted with confused applause by the crowds thronging the pavements. Someone stuck his head in at the window of Marcello's car and shouted "Long live Freedom!" in Giulia's face, disappearing immediately afterward as though sucked back into the multitude that swarmed all around. Giulia said, "Wouldn't it be better to go back home?"

"Why?" replied Marcello, surveying the street through the glass of the windshield. "They're all so pleased. . . They're certainly not thinking of doing any harm to anyone. . . We'll leave the car somewhere and then walk about and see what's going on."

"Won't they steal the car?"

"Don't be absurd."

Marcello drove the car through the crowded streets in the center of the town in his usual thoughtful, composed, patient manner. In spite of the gloom of the black-out it was possible to distinguish quite clearly the movements of the crowd, with groups of people forming and groups encountering each other and then scattering and running here and there—all the movements shifting and varying, yet all animated by the same single, sincere exultation at the fall of the dictatorship. People who did not know each other embraced in the middle of the street. Here someone, after standing still for a long time, dumb and attentive, as a flag-decked truck drove past, suddenly took off his hat and yelled applause; there someone was running like a dispatch-bearer, from group to group, repeating phrases of encouragement and rejoicing; someone else, seized with a sudden fury of hatred, lifted a threatening fist at a dark, closed building that had been the seat of some public office. Marcello noticed there were large numbers of women on their husbands' arms, sometimes with their children too—a thing that had not happened for a long time, in the forced public manifestations of the fallen regime. Columns of determined-looking men, united, apparently, by some secret party bond, formed and marched past for a moment or two amid applause, and then seemed to be lost in the crowd; large, approving groups surrounded any impromptu orator; others gathered to sing hymns of freedom at the top of their voices. Marcello drove gently and patiently respecting each concourse of people and advancing very slowly. "How pleased they all are!" said Giulia, in a good-natured, companionable tone, forgetting both her fears and her own interests.

"In their place I should be too."

They went some distance up the Corso, through the crowd,

following two or three other slowly moving cars; then, at a narrow side street, Marcello turned, and, after waiting for a column of demonstrators to pass, managed to drive into it. He drove on quickly into another completely deserted lane behind the side street, stopped, switched off the engine, and turning to his wife, said, "Let's get out."

Giulia got out without a word, and Marcello, having carefully locked the doors of the car, walked with her toward the street they had recently left. He felt completely calm now, completely detached and master of himself, just as he had desired to be during the whole of that day. He kept a careful watch on himself, however; and as he came out again into the crowded street and the joy of the throng exploded in his face its tumultuous rush of aggressive sincerity, he immediately asked, not without anxiety, whether this joy did not arouse in his mind some feeling that was far from serene. No, he thought, after a moment of careful self-examination, he felt neither regret, nor scorn, nor fear. He was truly calm, apathetic, dead, and he was ready to contemplate other people's joy without sharing in it but also without resenting it as a threat or an affront.

They started wandering about aimlessly among the crowd, from one group to another, from one side of the street to the other. Giulia was no longer frightened now, and appeared, like him, to be quite calm and self-possessed; but this, he knew, was because of her good-natured capacity for identifying herself with other people's feelings. The crowd, instead of diminishing, seemed to increase each moment. It was a crowd, Marcello noticed, almost wholly joyful, with a joy that was amazed and incredulous and awkward at expressing itself, and not yet quite sure that it would do so with impunity. More trucks, forcing their way with difficulty through the multitude, moved past laden with working-class people, both men

and women, waving flags, some of them tricolor, some red. A small German open car went past, with two officers lolling quietly back in their seats and a soldier in battle dress sitting on the edge of the door holding a Tommy gun: whistles and sneering cries rose from the pavements. Marcello noticed that there were numbers of soldiers about, very much at their ease and carrying no arms, but embracing each other, their stolid peasant faces lit up with a kind of inebriate hopefulness. The first time he saw two of these soldiers walking along with their arms round each other's waists like two lovers, their bayonets bouncing up and down against their unbuttoned tunics, Marcello found they produced in him a feeling very much like scorn: they were men in uniform, and for him uniform meant, inexorably, decorum and dignity, whatever the feelings of its wearer might be. Giulia, as though guessing his thoughts, pointed at the two affectionate, untidy soldiers and asked him, "Didn't they say the war was to continue?"

"They said so," answered Marcello, admitting himself suddenly, and with a painful effort of comprehension, to be in the wrong, "but it isn't true. . . Those poor fellows are quite right to be pleased: for them the war really is over."

In front of the great door of the Ministry to which Marcello had gone for his orders the day before he left for Paris, there was a great crowd of people protesting and shouting and waving their fists in the air. Those nearest the door were beating upon it with their hands and demanding that it should be opened. The name of the now fallen Minister was being loudly repeated, in a tone of particular loathing and disgust, by many of those in the crowd. Marcello watched this concourse of people for some time without understanding what the demonstrators wanted. At last the door was very slightly opened and in the crack appeared a pale, imploring commissionaire in a braided uniform. He said something to those

nearest to him, somebody went in the door that was immediately closed again, the crowd yelled again for a little and then dispersed; but not entirely, for a few obstinate people remained, still knocking at the closed door and still shouting.

They left the Ministry and went on into the adjoining square. A shout of "Make way, make way!" caused the crowd to fall back and them with it. Stretching his head forward, Marcello saw three or four rough youths coming along, pulling behind them by a rope a large bust of the Dictator. The bust was bronze in color but was really of painted plaster, as one saw from a number of white chips caused by the violent way in which they bounced it over the paving stones. A little dark man, his face almost hidden behind a huge pair of tortoise-shell spectacles, looked at the bust and then turned toward Marcello and said, laughing, in a sententious voice, "It looked like bronze but really it was just vulgar chalk." Marcello did not answer, and for a moment, craning his neck, he stared intently at the bust while it went bouncing heavily along in front of him. It was a bust like hundreds of others placed here and there in ministries and public offices—coarsely stylized, with jaw thrust out, eyes round and hollow, smooth, swollen cranium. He could not but reflect how that mouth of sham bronze, image of another, living mouth once so arrogant, was now trailing in the dust amid the sneers and whistles of the same crowd that had once so warmly acclaimed it. Again Giulia seemed to guess his thoughts, for she murmured, "Just think, once upon a time a bust like that in a waiting room was all that was needed to make people lower their voices!"

He answered drily, "If they had him here now, in the flesh, they'd do the same to him as they're doing to that bust."

"D'you think they'll kill him?"

"Certainly, if they can."

They walked on a little farther, through the crowd that

jostled and swirled in the darkness like turbulent, unstable flood-water. At one street corner a group of people had put up a long ladder at the corner of a building, and a man who had climbed to the top of the ladder was hammering vigorously at a stone that bore the name of the regime. Someone said with a laugh to Marcello, "There are Fascist signs everywhere . . . it'll take years to efface them all."

"It certainly will," said Marcello.

They crossed the square and made their way through the crowd to the arcade. It was almost in darkness, but by the dim light of the blacked-out lamps they came upon a group of people at the point where the two arms of the arcade meet, standing in a circle around something that could not be seen. Marcello went closer to look, and found there was a boy dancing in the middle of the circle: he was giving a comic parody of the gestures and contortions of a woman performing the *danse du ventre;* and he had a portrait of the Dictator, a colored oleograph, fixed over his head by means of a hole made in the paper, like a collar, so that he looked like someone who has been put in the pillory and is dancing with the contraption still hanging round his neck. As they were going back towards the square, a young officer with a little black beard and frenzied eyes, with a dark, excited, bareheaded girl on his arm, leaned over toward Marcello and shouted to him in a tone that was both exalted and didactic, "Long live freedom . . . but even more, long live the King!"

Giulia looked at her husband. "Long live the King!" said Marcello, without blinking an eyelid. They walked away and then Marcello remarked, "There are plenty of Monarchists who are trying to turn the thing to the advantage of the monarchy. . . Let's go and see what's going on in the Piazza del Quirinale."

They went back, not without some difficulty, to the turning,

and thence to the lane where they had left the car. As Marcello was switching on the engine, Giulia said to him, "D'you really want to? . . . I'm so tired of all this screeching."

"Well, we've nothing better to do."

He drove the car quickly by side streets up to the Piazza del Quirinale. When they reached the square, they saw that it was not completely full of people. The crowd, at its thickest underneath the balcony on which members of the Royal Family usually showed themselves, grew more and more scattered toward the edges of the square, so that there was plenty of empty space. Even here there was little light; the big iron lamp-standards, with their clusters of feeble, dreary, yellowish lights, scarcely relieved the dull blackness of the throng. There was little applause, nor were there frequent calls from the crowd for anyone to appear on the balcony. Here in the square, more than elsewhere, the crowd did not seem to know very clearly what it wanted. There was more curiosity than enthusiasm: just as people had previously assembled, as though to watch some spectacle, in order to see and hear the Dictator, so now they wanted to see and hear whoever it was who had overthrown the Dictator. As the car moved gently round the square, Giulia asked in a low voice, "Will the King really come out on the balcony?"

Before answering, Marcello twisted his head round to take a look at the balcony through the glass of the windshield. It was feebly illuminated by the reddish light of a couple of torches, and in between them they saw the closed window shutter. Then he replied, "I don't suppose so. . . Why should he?"

"Then what are all these people waiting for?"

"Nothing at all. . . It's just the habit of going into a piazza and calling for somebody."

Marcello circled very slowly round the square; it was as

though he were politely pushing the reluctant groups of people out of his way with the fenders. Giulia said, quite unexpectedly, "D'you know, I feel almost disappointed?"

"Why?"

"I thought they'd be doing something or other—burning houses, killing people. . . When we came out I was afraid for you, and that was why I came. . . But there's nothing—nothing but yelling and clapping, Long live this and down with that, and singing and marching. . ."

Marcello could not refrain from answering, "The worst is yet to come."

"What d'you mean?" she demanded in a frightened voice. "For us, or for the others?"

"For us *and* for the others."

He immediately regretted having spoken when he felt Giulia seize his arm violently, in distress. "I knew all the time," she said, "that what you were telling me wasn't true—when you said that everything would come right. . . And now you're saying the same yourself."

"Don't be frightened. . . I was only just talking."

Giulia said no more; but she held tightly to his arm with both hands and pressed herself against him. Embarrassed, but unwilling to repel her, Marcello drove the car back through side streets toward the Corso. Once there, he continued to follow the less frequented streets and at last reached the Piazza del Popolo, and from there continued his way up the steep slope of the Pincio towards Villa Borghese. Crossing the Pincio, dark and peopled only by marble busts, they followed the riding-track in the direction of Via Veneto. When they came to the entrance at Porta Pinciana, Giulia said suddenly, in a sad and languishing voice, "I don't want to go home."

"Why?" asked Marcello, slowing down.

"I don't know why," she replied, looking straight in front of her, "but my heart sinks at the very thought of it. . . It seems to me like a place that we're going to leave forever. . . I don't mean anything terrible, though," she hastened to add, "just a place we've got to move out of."

"Where d'you want to go, then?"

"Anywhere you like."

"Shall we drive round Villa Borghese?"

"Yes, let's do that."

Marcello took the car down a long, dark avenue at the far end of which was the pale glimmer of the Borghese Museum building. When they reached the open space in front of it, he stopped, switched off the engine and said, "Shall we go for a little walk?"

"Yes, if you like."

They got out and walked off arm in arm toward the gardens at the back of the Museum. The park was deserted, political events having depopulated it even of loving couples. The marble statues, with their mournful or heroic gestures, gleamed dully white in the dim light, against the dark, leafy background trees. They walked as far as the fountain and lingered there for a moment, in silence, looking down into its still, black water. Giulia was clinging tightly now to her husband's hand, pushing her fingers vigorously between his, in a sort of miniature embrace. They walked on, turning into a very dark avenue leading through a grove of oak trees. After a few steps Giulia suddenly stopped, and, turning, put her arm around Marcello's neck and kissed him on the mouth. They stood like that, embracing and kissing in the middle of the avenue, for some time. Then they separated, and Giulia, taking her husband by the hand and drawing him in among the trees, whispered, "Come and let's make love here . . . on the ground."

"No, really," Marcello could not help exclaiming, "here?"

"Yes, here," she said. "Why not? . . . Come, I want it, so as to feel reassured."

"Reassured about what?"

"Everyone thinks about war, and politics, and air raids—when they could really be so happy. . . Come on. . . Why, I'd do it right in the middle of one of their public squares," she added with sudden exasperation, "if only to show that I, at least, am capable of thinking about something else. . . Come on."

She seemed now to be in a state of exaltation, and went in front of him into the thick darkness among the tree-trunks. "You see what a lovely bedroom," he heard her murmur. "Soon we shan't have a home at all . . . but this is a bedroom they can't ever take away from us. . . We can sleep and make love here as often as we like." All of a sudden she vanished, as though she had sunk into the earth. Marcello looked about and then caught sight of her in the darkness, lying on the ground at the foot of a tree, one arm pillowing her head, the other raised toward him in silent invitation to lie down beside her. He did so, and no sooner was he there than Giulia twined her arms and legs tightly round him, kissing him all over his face with a blind, slow energy, as though she were seeking, on his brow and cheeks, other mouths through which she might penetrate into him. But almost at once her embrace slackened, and Marcello saw her half raise herself above him, gazing into the darkness. "Someone's coming," she said.

Marcello, too, sat up and looked. Through the trees, still some way off, the light of a pocket lamp swayed as it advanced and threw a feeble circular glimmer on the ground in front of it. There was no sound, for the thick carpet of dead leaves dulled the footsteps of the unknown person. The lamp advanced in their direction, and Giulia quickly composed

herself and sat up, throwing her arms round her knees. Sitting side by side with their backs to the tree, they watched the light approach. "It must be a park-keeper," murmured Giulia.

The lamp was now shining on the ground at a short distance from them; then it was raised and its rays fell full upon them. Dazzled, they gazed at the dim, shadowy face of the man from whose fist the white light issued. The light, thought Marcello, would surely be lowered, once the park-keeper had taken a good look at them. But no, the light still continued to shine full in their faces as the man stared at them in a silence that seemed, to Marcello, to be fraught with astonishment and speculation. "May I ask what you want with us?" he then demanded in a resentful tone.

"I don't want anything, Marcello," replied a gentle voice at once. At the same time the light was lowered and began to move away from them.

"Who it it?" murmured Giulia. "He seems to know you."

Marcello sat motionless, not daring to breathe, profoundly disturbed. Then he said to his wife, "Forgive me, one moment. . . I'll be back at once." He jumped to his feet and pursued the unknown man.

He caught up with him at the edge of the garden, beside the pedestal of one of the white marble statues. There was a lamppost not far off, and as the man turned at the sound of his footsteps he recognized him immediately, even after all those years, by the smooth, ascetic face beneath his brush-like hair. He had seen him before in a close-fitting chauffeur's tunic; and now, too, he was wearing a uniform—black, buttoned up to the neck, with wide breeches and black leather gaiters. He held his cap under his arm and grasped the pocket lamp in his hand. He said at once, with a smile, "People who don't die always reappear."

The remark seemed to Marcello to be altogether too well

suited to the circumstances, although it was meant as a joke and was perhaps unconscious. Breathless with agitation and with running, he said, "But I thought I'd. . . I thought I'd killed you."

"I hoped you knew that they'd saved me, Marcello," answered Lino quietly. "It's true that one paper announced that I was dead, but it was a mistake. . . Somebody else died in the hospital, in the bed next to mine. . . And so you thought I was dead. . . I said rightly, then: people who don't die always reappear."

It was not so much the rediscovery of Lino that now filled Marcello with horror as the familiar, conversational, although somber, tone that had at once been established between them. He said, unhappily, "My having believed you dead has had all sorts of consequences. And you weren't dead after all. . ."

"For me too, Marcello, there were all sorts of consequences," said Lino, looking at him with a kind of compassion. "I thought it was a warning, and I got married. . . Then my wife died. . . And then," he added more slowly, "it all began over again. . . Now I do night duty as a park-keeper. . . These gardens are full of good-looking boys like you." He spoke these words with gentle, quiet effrontery, but without the slightest suggestion of a compliment. Marcello noticed, for the first time, that his hair was graying and that his face had become a little fatter. "And you're married," he went on. "That was your wife, wasn't it?"

Suddenly Marcello was unable to bear this subdued, dreary chatter any longer. Seizing hold of the man by the shoulders and shaking him, he said, "You talk to me as if nothing had happened. . . D'you realize that you ruined my whole life?"

Without attempting to free himself, Lino replied, "Why d'you say that to me, Marcello? You're married, I dare say you've got children, you look as if you were comfortably off

—what are you complaining of? It would have been worse if you had really killed me."

"But I," Marcello could not help exclaiming, "I, when I met you, was innocent . . . and since then I haven't been, ever again."

He saw Lino look at him in surprise. "But all of us, Marcello," he said, "all of us have been innocent. . . Wasn't I innocent myself once? And we all lose our innocence, one way or another; it's the normal thing." He freed himself without difficulty from Marcello's already relaxed grip, and added, in a knowing sort of way, "Look, here's your wife. . . We'd better leave each other."

"Marcello," called Giulia's voice in the darkness.

He turned and saw Giulia approaching in a hesitating manner. At the same moment Lino put on his cap, raised his hand in salute and hurried away in the direction of the museum. "Well, who was it?" asked Giulia.

"A schoolfriend of mine," replied Marcello, "who's ended up as a park-keeper."

"Let's go home," said she, taking his arm again.

"Don't you want to walk any more?"

"No. . . I'd rather go home."

They went to the car, drove away, and did not speak until they reached home. As he drove, Marcello thought again of Lino's words, so unconsciously significant, "We all lose our innocence, one way or another; it's the normal thing." Those words, he thought, held a concentrated judgment on his life. He had done what he had done in order to redeem himself from an imaginary crime; yet Lino's words had made him see, for the first time, that, even if he had not met him and had not fired at him and had not been convinced that he had killed him, even if, in fact, nothing had happened, he would still have done what he had done simply because, in any case, he

would have had to lose his innocence and, consequently, would have desired to regain it. Normality was precisely this desire —as wearisome as it was vain—to justify a life trapped in its own original guilt, and it was not the deceptive mirage that he had pursued ever since the day of his meeting with Lino.

He heard Giulia's voice asking, "What time shall we leave tomorrow morning?" and he dismissed these thoughts as so many troublesome and now useless witnesses of his own error.

"As early as possible," he answered.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

MARCELLO woke at down and saw, or thought he saw, his wife standing in the corner of the room near the window, looking out in the gray light of the first moment of daybreak. She was completely naked. With one hand she held aside the curtain and with the other she covered her breast, but whether her gesture was one of modesty or of apprehension, it was impossible to say. A long lock of loose hair hung down her cheek; her face, bent forward, was pale and colorless and wore an expression of desolate thoughtfulness, of pensive dismay. Her body seemed during that night to have lost its look of robust, eager exuberance; her breasts, slightly flattened and relaxed by maternity showed in profile a flabby, tired crease that he had never noticed before; her belly seemed not so much rounded as swollen-looking, and gave an impression of clumsy, helpless heaviness, accentuated by the attitude of her thighs that were pressed together, as though trembling, to hide her groin. The cold light of awakening day, like an indiscreet but apathetic eye, fell dismally on this nudity. As he looked at her, Marcello wondered what was passing through her mind as she gazed, motionless in that shaft of pale dawn light, at the deserted courtyard. And he said to himself, with a sharp

feeling of compassion, that he could very well imagine what those thoughts might be. "Here am I," she was no doubt thinking, "here am I, driven out of my home before half my life is over, with a young child and a ruined husband who has nothing to hope from the future, whose fate is uncertain, whose very life may be in danger. This is what has come of all our efforts, of all our passion, of all our hopes." Truly, he thought, she was Eve driven out of Eden; and Eden was this home of theirs with all the modest things that it contained—the cupboards filled with their belongings, the cooking utensils, the drawing room for receiving friends, the plated spoons and forks, the sham Persian carpets, the china that her mother had given her, the refrigerator, the vase of flowers in the hall, this double bedroom with its false Empire furniture bought by installments—and he himself, lying in the bed watching her. Her Eden also consisted, without doubt, in the pleasure of sitting at table twice a day with her family, of sleeping at night in the arms of her husband, of attending her household, of making plans for the future for herself, for her daughter and for him. And finally, Eden meant peace of soul, harmony with herself and with the world, the serenity of a heart composed and satisfied. From this Eden she was now driven out, forever, by a raging, pitiless angel armed with a flaming sword, who was thrusting her, naked and defenseless, into the hostile outer world.

Marcello watched her for some time, while she stood there motionless, absorbed in her melancholy contemplation; then, as sleep weighed heavy on his eyelids, he saw her leave the window, move on tiptoe to the hanging cupboard, take down a dressing gown, put it on and noiselessly leave the room. She was probably going to sit beside the bed of the sleeping child, for further painful contemplation, or perhaps to finish her preparations for departure. For a moment he thought of

joining her, to comfort her in some way or other. But he was still heavy with sleep and he soon dropped off again.

Later, in the pure light of the summer morning, while they were driving towards Tagliacozzo, he thought again of that mournful vision, wondering whether he had dreamed it or had really seen it. His wife was sitting beside him, pressed close against him in order to make room for Lucilla, who was kneeling on the seat with her head out of the window, enjoying the drive. Giulia sat upright, her jacket unbuttoned over her white blouse, her face raised and shaded by the traveling hat she wore. Marcello noticed that she held on her knees an object of oblong shape done up in brown paper and tied with string. "What have you got in that parcel?" he asked in surprise.

"It'll make you laugh," she answered, "but I couldn't bear to leave that crystal vase that stood in the hall. . . I'm fond of it first of all because it's beautiful and then because it was you who gave it to me—d'you remember?—a short time after the child was born. . . It's a weakness of mine, I know, but never mind. . . I'll put some flowers in it when we get to Tagliacozzo."

So it was really true, he thought; he hadn't dreamt it, it was really Giulia, in flesh and blood, not a dream figure, that he had seen that morning standing by the window. He said, after a moment, "If you wanted to bring it away, you did quite right. . . But I assure you, we'll go home again at the proper time, as soon as the summer's over. . . You really mustn't be alarmed."

"I'm not alarmed."

"Everything will turn out for the best," went on Marcello, changing gear as the car started up a hill, "and then you'll be just as happy as you've been during these last years, or even more."

Giulia said nothing but did not appear convinced. Marcello, as he drove, glanced at her for a moment. With one hand she held the vase on her knee, while her other arm was round the waist of the child looking out of the window. All her affections, all her possessions, her attitude seemed to declare, were now here, in this car: her husband on one side of her, her child on the other, and—symbol of family life—the crystal vase on her knee. He recalled how at the moment of leaving she had cast a last look at the front of the building and had said, "I wonder who will come and occupy our flat"; and he realized that he would never be able to persuade her because there was no reasoned conviction in her mind, merely the frightened presentiment of instinct. He asked her, however, in a calm voice, "Tell me what you're thinking now?"

"Nothing special," she replied, "I wasn't really thinking about anything. . . I was looking at the landscape."

"No, I mean, what do you think in general?"

"In general? I think things are going badly for us . . . but that it's nobody's fault."

"Perhaps it's my fault."

"Why your fault? It's never anybody's fault. . . Everybody's right and wrong at the same time. . . Things go badly because they go badly, that's all." She spoke these words in an uncompromising tone, as if to show that she did not wish to talk any more. Marcello said nothing, and from that moment silence fell between them for some time.

It was still early, but there were already signs that the day would be hot. Already, in front of the car, between the hedges, dust-covered and shimmering with light, the air was quivering and the midsummer sun, beating down on the asphalt, made mirror-like reflections. The road wound through undulating country, among yellow hills of dry, shaggy stubble, with brown and gray farm buildings hidden here and there

at the bottom of lonely, treeless valleys. Every now and then they met a horse-drawn cart or an old-fashioned car. It was an unfrequented road and not used by military traffic. Everything looked calm, normal, indifferent, thought Marcello as he drove along; one would never have thought oneself in the heart of a country that was both at war and in the middle of a revolution. The faces of the few peasants they saw, leaning against fences or digging in the fields, expressed nothing more than the usual feelings of stolid, quiet attention to the normal, everyday, obvious things of life. These people's thoughts were of harvests, of sun and rain, of food prices, or, indeed, of nothing at all. Giulia had been for years like these peasants, he said to himself; and now she was grieved at her peace being torn away from her. The thought even came into his mind: so much the worse for her. Living, for human beings, did not mean abandoning oneself to the peaceful torpor provided by the indulgence of nature; it meant, rather, a state of continuous struggle and agitation, it meant the solving, every moment, of some tiny problem within the limits of larger problems that were contained, in turn, in the all-embracing problem of life itself. This thought restored his self-confidence; and now the road was leaving the monotonous, desolate country and climbing up among the high red rocks of a chain of hills.

Owing, perhaps, to his feeling, as he drove the car, that his body was part and parcel of the machine that so resolutely ing, hilly road, he became aware of a current of cold, adventurous optimism, the first he had known for many years, like and tirelessly faced and overcame the difficulties of the wind- a gust of rushing wind at last sweeping away the clouds from the stormy sky of his spirit. Now indeed, he felt, he could consider a whole period of his life as finished and buried, now he could begin all over again, on a different plan and with

different methods. His meeting with Lino, he felt, had been most valuable; not so much because it had freed him from remorse for a crime he had not committed as because Lino, with those few words he had happened to say about the inevitability and normality of the loss of innocence, had made him realize that for twenty years his feet had been obstinately set on a wrong road that he must now unhesitatingly abandon. This time there would be no need for justification or for other people's support; and he was determined not to allow the crime he had really committed—the killing of Quadri—to poison his life with the torments of a vain search for purification and normality. What had happened had happened. Quadri was dead; and over that corpse he had lowered the stone slab of complete and final forgetfulness, heavier than any tombstone.

The landscape had changed now from the sultry desert they had passed through earlier, and an abundance of invisible water had brought into being, at the edges of the road, a profusion of grass and flowers and ferns and, higher up, along the tufa rock-ledges, the thick, exuberant foliage of small trees. This was the reason, perhaps, why Marcello felt that from now on for good and all, he would know how to avoid the desolation of those deserts in which man follows his own shadow and feels himself pursued and guilty; and would seek instead, freely and adventurously, places like the one he was now passing through, places that were rocky and pathless, fit for brigands and wild animals. He had bound himself, voluntarily, obstinately, stupidly, with unworthy ties and with obligations even more unworthy; all this he had done for the mirage of a normality that did not exist; but now those ties were broken, those obligations dissolved, and he was free again and would know how to make use of freedom. At that moment the landscape appeared at its most picturesque: on

one side of the road the plantation of young trees covered the hillside; on the other a grassy slope, with a few huge, leafy oaks, fell away to a ravine filled with bushes through which glinted the foaming waters of a stream. On the far side of the ravine rose a wall of rock down which plunged a waterfall like a shining ribbon. Suddenly Marcello stopped the car and said, "What a lovely place! . . . Let's stop for a moment."

The little girl turned round from the window and asked, "Have we arrived?"

"No," said Giulia, "we haven't arrived yet, we're going to stop for a moment," and she took her in her arms and lifted her out of the car.

When they had all got out, Giulia said she would take the opportunity of their halt to let the child fulfill the needs of nature, and Marcello stayed near the car while she took Lucilla by the hand and led her a little distance away. She walked slowly, not stooping down toward the child, who, in her little white, short dress, with a big bow on the top of her hair that hung loose on her shoulders, chattered away with her usual animation, looking up every now and then towards her mother, no doubt to ask a question. Marcello wondered what place his daughter would have in the new, free future that his sudden fit of elation had depicted, and he told himself, with a rush of affection, that he would anyhow be able to put her on her way toward a life inspired by motives entirely different from those that until now had guided his own. In his daughter's life, he felt, all must be liveliness, caprice, grace, lightness, clarity, freshness, adventure; it must all be like a landscape that knows neither mist nor sultriness but only those quick, purifying storms that clear the air and make colors look brighter. There must be nothing in it of the savage pedantry which, until the day before, had shaped his own

destiny. Yes, he said to himself, she must live in the fullest freedom.

With these thoughts in his mind, he left the edge of the road and went toward the shady wood on the other side. The trees here were tall and leafy, there were briars and other bushes beneath them, and beneath them again, in the sylvan shade, grass and flowers grew on a bed of moss. Marcello put his hand through the tangle of branches and picked one of these flowers, a campanula of an almost violet blue. It was a single campanula with white-streaked petals, and when he held it to his nose it had a bitter grassy smell. He reflected that this flower, that had grown amid the shady tangle of the undergrowth, on the thin layer of earth that clung to the infertile tufa, had not sought to imitate taller, stronger plants nor to examine its own fate for the purpose of accepting or rejecting it. In full unconsciousness and freedom, it had grown where its seed had chanced to fall, until the day when his hand had gathered it. To be like that solitary flower, on a patch of moss in the dark undergrowth—that, he thought, was a truly humble and natural fate. On the other hand, the deliberate humility of seeking an impossible relationship with a normality which was in any case fallacious was merely a mask for inverted pride and self-esteem.

He started when he heard his wife's voice saying, "Come along, let's go on," and went back to his place at the wheel. The car moved swiftly along the curving road, skirting the slope where the scattered oak trees grew, and then, after passing through a thick wood, came out through a deep cleft in the hillside at a point where there was a view over an immense plain. The distant horizon, with its rim of blue mountains, was indistinct in the July sultriness. In the golden light, through the faint haze, Marcello could see, in the middle of

the plain, a solitary, precipitous crag, and on its top, like an acropolis, a little town consisting of a few houses clustering beneath the towers and walls of a castle. He could see distinctly the gray sides of the houses hanging sheer above the road that ran round the walls and continued, spirally, round and down the mountain; the castle was square in shape, with a squat, cylindrical tower at one side; the town was rose pink in color, and the blazing sunlight struck murderous sparks from the windows. At the foot of the crag the road ran in a white line, dead straight, towards the farthest limits of the plain; and opposite, on the farther side of the road, lay the wide, level, yellowish-green expanse of an airfield. In contrast with the ancient houses in the town, everything about the airfield looked new and modern—the three long hangers camouflaged in green and blue and brown, the mast at the top of which fluttered a red and white pennant, the numbers of silvery aircraft placed as though at random round the edges of the field.

Marcello looked carefully at this landscape as the car, twisting and turning down the steep road, descended rapidly toward the plain. The contrast between the ancient crag and the utterly modern airfield seemed to him significant, but his mind was suddenly distracted and he did not succeed in defining where, precisely, the significance lay. For at the same moment he became conscious of a strange feeling of familiarity, as though he had seen this landscape before. And yet he recollected that this was the first time he had ever traveled by that road.

They reached the bottom of the hill and started along the straight road that appeared so interminable. Marcello accelerated, and the pointer of the speedometer rose gradually to forty-five, then to fifty miles an hour. The road now ran between two wide expanses of mown fields, of a metallic

yellow color and without a tree or a house. Evidently, thought Marcello, the local people all lived in the town and came down in the morning to work in the fields. In the evening they went back into the town again . . .

His attention was drawn away from these reflections by his wife's voice. "Look," she said, pointing to the airfield. "What's happening?"

Marcello looked and saw a number of people running over the great flat field, waving their arms. At the same time, looking all the more strange in the dazzling light of the summer sun, a tongue of flame—red, pointed, almost smokeless—blazed from the roof of one of the three hangers. Then another flame darted from the second roof and yet another from the third. Now the three flames seemed to be united in one single flame that moved violently, while clouds of black smoke rolled downward to the ground, hiding the hangers, spreading everywhere. All sign of life had meanwhile vanished and the airfield looked utterly deserted.

Marcello said calmly, "An air raid."

"Is there any danger?"

"No, they must have gone past already."

He accelerated, and the speedometer rose to sixty, to seventy-five miles an hour. They were right below the town now, and could see the road running round the walls, the sides of the house, the castle. At the same moment, Marcello heard behind him the clamorous, furious roar of an airplane coming down low. In the midst of the noise he could distinguish the hail-like patter of machine-gun fire, and he realized that the plane was behind him and would soon be over him. He could tell from the sound of its engine that it was following the line of the road, straight and inflexible as the road itself. Soon the metallic roar was right overhead, deafening, just for one moment; and then it was further away

again. He felt a violent blow on his shoulder, like a blow from a fist, and then a deathly langour came over him. He managed, desperately, to summon all his strength and to steer the car to the side of the road and stop there. "Let's get out," he said faintly, putting his hand to the door and opening it.

The door flew open and Marcello fell out; then, his face and hands in the grass at the side of the road, he dragged his legs free of the car and lay on the ground near the ditch. But no one spoke, and no one appeared at the still open door of the car. At that moment, from far away, the roar of the airplane as it turned became loudly audible again. He said to himself, "Oh God, let them not be hit . . . they are innocent," and then he waited, resigned, face downward in the grass, for the plane to come back. The car, with its open door, was silent, and he had time to realize, with a sharp pang of pain, that no one would now get out of it. Then at last the plane was right above him; and it drew after it, as it receded into the burning sky, a curtain of silence and darkness.